Introduction

This Toolkit was designed for judges, court services staff, guardians ad litem, commonwealth attorneys, probation officers, local departments of social services, and others who refer families to parent education programs to enhance their understanding of the variations in the types of programs available and to assist them in making appropriate referrals based on the best fit between the families' needs and the focus and design of the program.

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*For more information, contact Patricia Hein, Chairperson, VSPEC, Best Practice Subcommittee at Patricia.Hein@richmond.gov.com
OVERVIEW OF PARENT EDUCATION

Definition of Parent Education

Parent education is a process for helping parents to understand children’s development, needs and uniqueness, and their own parental roles and responsibilities by offering strategies, tools, and insight for observing, interpreting, and responding to children’s behaviors in order to maximize positive outcomes for both children and families.

Types of Parent Education Programs

Primary: Programs offered to the general population that focus on enhancing parenting knowledge and skills on a wide range of universal topics. Parents participating in these programs are typically not court involved.

Secondary: Programs offered to parents and/or children who may be at risk of abuse or neglect and that focus on enhancing parenting knowledge and skills in specific areas known to be associated with risk and that include building self-awareness about the parenting approaches and behaviors that have the potential for putting children at risk. Parents participating in these programs may or may not have court involvement.

Tertiary: Programs offered to parents and/or children who have experienced abuse or neglect and that not only enhance parenting knowledge and skills but foster an understanding of how parents’ early experiences and belief system influence their parenting and empower parents to use their new knowledge and insight to change their behavior. Parents participating in these programs are typically, though not always, court involved.

General Characteristics of Effective Parent Education Programs

Included in this toolkit is a chart that compares the components of effective primary, secondary and tertiary parent education programs and their unique characteristics. Regardless of the type or level of the program, however, effective programs include the following:

- Clearly defined program goals, objectives and measurable outcomes;
- A focus on using family strengths to increase parental competence;
- Responsiveness to parents’ learning needs, developmental, educational and language levels and parents’ attitude toward parent education;
- Identification of the target population best served (e.g., substance abuse, incarceration), and, if serving court ordered clients, how the curriculum addresses their unique needs;
- Trained, knowledgeable, compassionate and engaging staff to provide parent education;
- Utilization of a curriculum that includes the following:
  (1) enhances one or more of the protective factors (parental resilience, knowledge of parenting and child development, nurturing and attachment, concrete supports in times of need, social connections, children’s social and emotional competence);
(2) is culturally responsive to families’ needs;
(3) provides an opportunity for parents to practice what they learn;

- Utilization of an evaluation component to assess the effectiveness of the program to achieve outcomes for parents identified, preferably a pre and post test to measure change;
- Completion of the total program in order to be effective; and
- Follow-up support and reinforcement of learning with families.

Finding the Right Fit for Parents to Meet their Needs

The most effective parent education program is one that is responsive to the specific needs of the parent. We encourage each court district and local community to determine the needs of the parenting stakeholders in their jurisdiction. For a specific family, the attached Characteristics of Effective Parent Education document can help you choose the right fit based on the needs of the parents, the risk factors present, and the components of the program.

Use of Evidence-Based and Evidence-Informed Models in Parent Education

When considering referrals to parenting classes, practitioners and judges should consider the level of intervention needed and the validity of the program being offered. Research indicates that using an evidence-based model for parent education increases the likelihood of increasing parental competence. When using evidence-based programs, providers need to adhere to the structure and content of the model in order to maintain fidelity. Evidenced-informed models can also be appropriate in tertiary programs that rely on a combination of research-based, evidence-informed, trauma-focused treatments, and are adaptable for individual parental needs.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) defines "evidence-based practice" as a combination of the following three factors: (1) best research evidence, (2) best clinical experience, and (3) consistent with patient [or family] values (Institute of Medicine. 2001. Crossing the quality chasm: A new health system for the 21st century. Washington, DC: National Academy). Examples of evidence-based models for parent education include: Nurturing Parenting Program, Parents as Teachers, and The Incredible Years.

Programs that have demonstrated effectiveness in treating and preventing the re-occurrence of child maltreatment are recommended for intervention (secondary) and treatment (tertiary). SAMHSA (www.samhsa.gov/) and CEBC (www.cebc4cw.org/) are good resources that include information on levels of recognition for established, effective parent education programs.

A best practice is a method or technique that has consistently shown results superior to those achieved with other means, and that is used as a benchmark. It is a practice that can be evidence-informed, in addition to evidence-based, incorporates practice wisdom from the field and clinical experience, and is consistent with family/client values. Best practice can be used as an alternative in the absence of mandatory legislated standards, and, when such standards are present, to support and enhance them. The Characteristics of Effective Parent Education Programs incorporates current best practice knowledge.