

Overcoming Challenges: Reaching Out to All Parents

Time: Be flexible when scheduling meetings. Try different times of the day or week to allow all parents to take part at least occasionally. Hold a potluck meeting once in a while to meet working parents' needs. Have meetings at community centers, apartment buildings and places of worship.

Not Valued: Personally welcome all parents, especially those who appear to be withdrawn or uncomfortable. Learn their interests and abilities. Actively seek opportunities for hesitant parents to use their experiences and talents to benefit the school.

Don't Know How to Contribute: Conduct a talent survey, then think of ways to use the parents' many talents. Encourage parents to share information on careers, hobbies, and pets. Arrange for workshops and seminars for parent and community members on leadership and organizational skills.

Don't Understand the System: Write a parent's handbook covering the rules, procedures, and where to find answers to frequently asked questions.

Child Care: Find an available room in the school for child care. Hire students to baby sit.

Language Barrier: Have printed materials translated- English on one side, another language on the other. Arrange for an interpreter at meetings and conferences.

Cultural Differences: Be sensitive to other cultures' values, attitudes, manners and views of the school. Know the religious holidays and observances of all groups in your school.

Transportation: Visit parents in their home. Hold small group meetings in a community center, at a parent's home, or another convenient place. Arrange car pools and walk pools. Arrange for transportation.

Offer of Only Token Participation: Parent meetings should look at real issues to gain parents' ideas, and listen to and consider their solutions. Parents should be involved in the planning stages of a program, rather than after nearly everything has been decided.

Not Welcome: Arrange for training in parent involvement for all school staff. Make sure that parents are welcome to drop in at school during the day. Have a family resource center at school. Post welcome signs in all languages spoken at the school.

Resistance of Formal Leadership: Is there an unwillingness- conscious or unconscious- among some of the existing leadership to involve others in decision-making? Ensure that parents are involved in planning, policy making, and implementation of programs.

Parents Have Overwhelming Problems: Provide information and advocacy to help parents secure the services they need, such as food stamps, job training skills, medical treatment, child care, etc.

Low Literacy: Call on the telephone. Contact your library to find literacy groups or tutors of English as a Second Language. Plan a family literacy program as part of your parent involvement program.

After-School Programs That Say Welcome in Every Language

- Program staff greets visitors in a friendly, courteous way.
- Program staff answers the telephone in a friendly, professional way.
- A welcome sign (in all the languages of your community) for the program is displayed near the entrance.
- An orientation is provided every year and individually for new families in the district.
- There is a suggestion box where teachers, students, and parents can contribute ideas.
- Parents are welcome at all times in the program, and to visit classrooms.
- Alternative communication methods are used with parents speaking limited English in order for them to understand the program and participate in activities.
- Information about program rules, parent-teacher conferences, school and classroom policy, and bus and lunch schedules is available to parents.
- Students are encouraged and praised by staff.
- A resource center for parents and teachers is available if possible. It is furnished with comfortable furniture and provides parenting information.
- There is a bulletin board on which news and announcements are posted for parents.
- Local businesses and associations offer information and enrichments projects to students.
- Coordinator and staff are willing to listen to parent/guardian concerns about their student placement and are willing to make adjustments when necessary.
- Whenever possible, staff is willing to honor parental requests.

Promising Practices to Engage Families in After-School Programs

Strategy 1: Support Families

The field of family support has shown that efforts that are truly supportive view families from a strengths-based perspective, are responsive to their needs and interests, and empower parents to act on their own and their children's behalf. Services and activities include parenting workshops, adult education, and services such as health and housing support. To build on family strengths, after-school programs can do the following:

- Focus on families' assets.
- Consider the concerns and needs of your families and children, in addition to your programmatic needs and mission.
- Solicit feedback on current programming and implement their ideas for new programming.

Things You Can Do to Support Families

- Have a parent suggestion box.
- Host parent forums or discussion groups that allow parents to meet one another and discuss their concerns and experiences with child rearing, culture clash, and other family matters.
- Strike up conversations with parents that focus on them. Give them time to talk about themselves instead of their children.
- Work with the children to plan and host a family appreciation event.

Strategy 2: Communicate and Build Trusting Relationships

Successful family engagement efforts depend in part on the level of trust families feel for program staff. Communication is a core component of building that trust. Letting families know that they are welcome, using a variety of communication strategies, and keeping two-way lines of communication open are fundamental communication strategies. A communication log can help after school

Things You Can Do to Communicate & Build Trusting Relationships

- Make a regular effort to share positive news with each parent about their child.
- Welcome parents. Greet them when they arrive. Always call parents by name and make a point of smiling.
- Offer fun family activities, e.g. craft nights, potlucks, and weekend trips to museums, theaters, or other cultural institutions.

programs track their communications with families, and improve their communication efforts. Programs can use a log to assess how often they are reaching out to families, the nature of their interactions with families, and with whom they are communicating. After-school programs should employ strategies which focus on basic communication as well as more elaborate practices to solicit families' input regarding program governance and leadership.

- Communicate frequently and in positive ways.
- Be there for families.
- Provide leadership opportunities for parents in order to build community.

Strategy 3: Hire and Develop a Family-Focused Staff

Staffing is a critical component of any program; without positive family–staff relationships, even the best-intentioned program will not succeed. Increased involvement, engagement, and leadership of families depends on the initiative and approach of staff. Welcoming families requires staff sensitivity toward families, either developed through staff’s prior experience or professional development, and often someone who will make a deliberate effort to connect with families.

Things You Can Do to Develop a Family-Focused Staff

- When hiring staff, consider candidates’ experience working with families and ask how after-school programs can engage families.
- Invite a family engagement expert to speak to staff.
- Offer programs for both parents and staff together, e.g. exercise classes, first aid, and art workshops.

- Designate a staff member who has, as part of his or her duties, responsibility for engaging families in the program.
- Hire staff with family engagement experience.
- Hire staff who share parents’ perspectives and backgrounds.
- Foster professional development through a network of after school programs committed to family engagement.

Strategy 4: Build Linkages Across Individuals and Organizations

Partnering with community organizations and working with schools benefits a program’s relationships with families and can help foster meaningful engagement. Program coordinators who meet with school administrators and teachers can better express school concerns and children’s academic needs to parents. After-school programs can help expose families to opportunities that they would not necessarily participate in as a family through linkages with the community.

- Collaborate with local organizations to boost family engagement.
- Act as a liaison between families and schools.
- Help parents develop skills to advocate for themselves and their children at school.

Things You Can Do to Link with Individuals and Organizations

- Invite parents to help you locate resources in the community to support program activities, e.g. field trip sites, funders, or families support services.
- Ask a classroom teacher to talk to parents about grade-level expectations and developmentally appropriate activities for children.
- Offer workshops with guest speakers on topics such as supporting children’s education and positive discipline.
- Offer to attend parent–teacher conferences or other school-based meetings with families who feel that they need support in discussing their concerns.

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WHAT WORKS FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS FOR ADOLESCENTS: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Social Interventions

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OVERVIEW

Adopting healthy and positive behaviors and avoiding risky ones are key developmental tasks of adolescence. Parents can play an important role in helping their adolescent children acquire or strengthen the behaviors, skills, attitudes, and motivation that promote physical and mental health and overall well-being. Recognizing this, a variety of programs and interventions engage parents in efforts to achieve one or more outcomes for their adolescents: academic achievement; a reduction in internalizing behaviors such as depression and anxiety, or in disruptive or delinquent behaviors; a reduction or avoidance of substance use; avoidance of sexual risk-taking; and achieving/maintaining health and fitness.

In this Fact Sheet, Child Trends synthesizes the findings from 47 rigorous evaluations of parent involvement interventions for adolescents to identify the components and strategies associated with successful programs and interventions. Programs were identified by searching LINKS (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully), Child Trends' database of random assignment, intent-to-treat studies of social interventions. The database can be accessed at <http://www.childtrends.org/LINKS>. We present lessons learned from 47 parent involvement programs that work, don't work, or have mixed results for adolescents ages 12 to 17. (See Table 1 for a program-by-program summary.)

Overall, nearly two-thirds of parent involvement programs were found to be effective – 30 out of 47 programs had positive impacts on at least one adolescent outcome. Interventions that build parenting skills generally had positive impacts (13 out of 18 worked). All (nine out of nine) family and teen-focused therapeutic interventions were found to work for at least one outcome. On the other hand, parent education programs--those that simply offer information, but do not offer parents opportunities to practice related skills--did not tend to work (only 3 out of 11 had a positive impact). Also, programs with a combined focus on parents and teens--those that include intervention components for both groups--were likely to be effective (21 out of 29 worked). Finally, programs offering at least five sessions were likely to have positive impacts (29 out of 30 such programs worked). Positive impacts for parent involvement programs were least likely to occur for substance use (7 out of 23 programs), educational (one out of seven programs), and reproductive health outcomes (none out of eight programs).

INTRODUCTION

Seven broad outcome areas were examined in this review of experimentally evaluated parent involvement programs: 1) academic achievement, 2) internalizing behavior (depressive or anxious symptoms), 3) disruptive or externalizing behavior (acting out or engaging in physical fights), 4) delinquency, 5) substance use, 6) reproductive health (pregnancy and condom use), and 7) health and fitness. Several intervention approaches, defined by program type and target population, are described below.

Program Type

- **Skills training** programs teach parents parenting skills, such as discipline, monitoring, limit setting, and communication, to change how they interact with their children. Parents are not given activities to practice with their children at home. (18 programs)
- **Parent education** programs deliver information about a certain topic, but do not build in opportunities for parents to practice skills or participate in activities with their children. (11 programs)
- **Parent-child involvement** programs provide teens and parents with opportunities to participate together in activities that are related to achieving program goals. These programs do not offer skills-training opportunities, and they may or may not teach parents new information. (Five programs)
- **Therapy (teen- or family-focused)** interventions – those focused on teens or families include family therapy interventions as well as adolescent psychotherapy with family involvement – are typically delivered by trained clinicians in an outpatient setting. (Nine programs)
- **Therapy with focus on parent or family issue (parent-focused):** Programs with a focus on a parent or family issue often teach parents how to deal with their own personal issues such as parent drug addiction or with family-related issues such as divorce, with the secondary goal of improving parenting skills. (Four programs)

Target Population

- **Combined focus on parents and teens:** Programs with a combined focus on parents and teens have intervention components that are specifically designed for parents and for teens. These components may be delivered to parents and teenagers in separate groups or in the same group. (29 programs)
- **Focus on teenagers, with limited parent involvement:** Programs with a focus on teenagers work primarily with teens (either individually or with other teens) and involve parents in a limited way. For instance, a program may deliver a well-developed, 25-week curriculum for teens and involve parents in small ways—by sending home materials that include information about the program, asking youth to practice new skills at home with their parents, or designing a couple of sessions for parents. (Seven programs)
- **Focus on parents, with limited child involvement:** Programs with a focus on parents work primarily with parents and involve adolescents in a limited way. For instance, they may invite adolescents to only one or two of the sessions for the purpose of allowing parents a chance to practice new skills. (11 programs)

Cross-cutting themes drawn from all programs are presented next, followed by outcome-specific themes, where applicable. When school-based approaches were found to work consistently for certain outcomes, this finding is noted.

WHAT WORKS: Cross-Cutting Themes

- **Building parenting skills (skills training) often improves adolescent outcomes.** *Most programs designed to build parenting skills (13 out of 18) were found to have a statistically significant impact on at least one adolescent outcome. Outcomes include:*
 - Disruptive behavior problems (8 out of 10 skills training programs had positive impacts on this outcome domain)
 - Delinquency (four out of five programs had positive impacts on this outcome domain)

- Substance use (6 out of 11 skills-training programs had positive impacts on this outcome domain); all 5 of the programs that measured follow-up impacts resulted in long-term declines in substance use.
- **Teen- and family-focused therapy is effective.** *Most programs using teen- and family-focused therapy (eight out of eight) were found to have a statistically significant impact on at least one adolescent outcome, including the following outcomes:*
 - Disruptive Behavior Problems (five out of five programs had a positive impact in this outcome domain)
 - Obesity (two out of two programs had a positive impact in this outcome domain)
 - Education (one out of one program had a positive impact in this outcome domain); this was the only effective type of program for education)
 - Depression or Anxiety (four out of five programs had a positive impact in this outcome domain)
- **A combined focus on parents and adolescents appears to be more effective than focusing on one group or the other.** *Most programs with a two-pronged approach (21 out of 29) were found to have a statistically significant impact on at least one outcome, including the following outcomes:*
 - Disruptive behavior problems (11 out of 13 programs with a combined focus had a positive impact in this outcome domain)
 - Depression and/or anxiety (five out of seven programs with a combined focus had a positive impact in this outcome domain)
 - Delinquency (five out of seven programs with a combined focus had a positive impact in this outcome domain)
- **At least five sessions appear to be necessary for a program to be effective.** Twenty-nine out of 30 effective programs had more than five sessions. One effective program (a home-based intervention that relies on the use of digital media entitled [Parenting Adolescents Wisely](#)) had fewer than five sessions. All ineffective programs had fewer than five sessions. The exception is for abstinence-education programs targeting reproductive health outcomes: regardless of how many sessions these programs offered (some offered up to 40 sessions), this type of program was not found to work.

WHAT WORKS: Themes from Programs that Target Specific Outcomes for Teens

Adolescent Disruptive Behavior Disorders and Delinquency

- **Although parent education programs tended not to work overall, this strategy appeared to work for disruptive behavior disorders and delinquency.** Two out of two parent-education programs assessing impacts on disruptive behavior disorders were effective, and two out of two parent education programs assessing impacts on delinquency were effective. These findings are mitigated, however, by the small number of parent education programs assessing these outcomes.

MIXED REVIEWS: Cross-Cutting Themes

- **Programs using a parent-child involvement approach were not consistently effective.** Only two out of five parent-child involvement programs (see page 2 for definition) worked for at least one adolescent outcome (one was not found to work and two had mixed findings).

- **Parent involvement programs that integrated the use of technology were not consistently effective.** Only two out of four programs were effective, one was not proven to work, and one had mixed findings.

WHAT DOES NOT WORK: Cross-Cutting Themes

- **Parent education programs were generally ineffective.** Only 3 out of 11 parent education programs (see page 1 for definition) were effective. The three parent education programs that worked were all effective for disruptive behavior problems.

WHAT DOES NOT WORK: Themes from Programs that Target Specific Outcomes for Teens

Adolescent Education

- **A combined focus on parents and teens does not appear to improve academic outcomes.** Just one out of the five programs with a dual focus on parents and children ([Multidimensional Family Therapy](#)) that assessed academic outcomes improved these outcomes.
- **Skills training programs were not associated with improved educational outcomes.** While effective for other outcomes, none of five parent skills-training programs assessing educational outcomes improved these outcomes. This anomalous finding could be because none of the programs evaluating this outcome were designed to target this outcome.

Substance Use

- **Teen- and family-focused therapy does not appear to reduce substance use.** *Among teen- and family-focused therapy programs,* only one out of four that assessed impacts on substance use led to decreased use.

Adolescent Reproductive Health

- **A combined focus on parents and teens does not appear to improve adolescent reproductive health outcomes.** None out of the six reproductive health programs with a dual focus on parents and children improved adolescent reproductive health outcomes. However, all of these programs focused on abstinence, so it is unclear whether a combined parent-teen approach does not work for reproductive health outcomes generally.

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WHAT WORKS FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Social Interventions

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OVERVIEW

Child health and well-being are intrinsically important and also contribute to a healthy, productive adolescence and adulthood. Parents can play an important role in helping their children acquire or strengthen the behaviors, skills, attitudes, and motivation that promote physical and mental health and overall well-being in childhood, adolescence and well into their adulthood. Acknowledging this, a variety of programs and interventions engage parents in efforts to achieve one or more outcomes for their children: academic achievement and attendance; a reduction in internalizing behaviours such as depression and anxiety, a reduction in externalizing behaviours or acting out such as aggression or delinquent behaviours; an awareness, reduction, or avoidance of substance abuse; awareness or avoidance of risky sexual behavior; and achieving/maintaining health and fitness.

In this Fact Sheet, Child Trends synthesizes the findings from 67 rigorous evaluations of parent involvement interventions for children ages 6-11 years old to identify the components and strategies associated with successful programs and interventions. Programs were identified by searching LINKS (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully), Child Trends' database of random assignment, intent-to-treat studies of social interventions. The database can be accessed at <http://www.childtrends.org/LINKS>. We present lessons learned from 67 parent involvement programs that work, don't work, or have mixed results for children aged 6-11. (See Table 1 for a program-by-program summary.)

Overall, programs that actively engage parents generally have positive impacts. These include parenting skills training programs (21 of 25 evaluated programs had positive impacts on at least one child outcome), parent-child involvement programs (15 of 18 had a positive impact), and programs that actively involved both parents and children (40 of 46 had a positive impact). However, parent education-only programs did not generally have impacts; only six of 19 had impacts on any child outcomes. On the other hand, most (10 of 12) programs that integrate technology into their interventions have positive impacts on at least one child outcome.

INTRODUCTION

Programs that address parenting take varied approaches. This synthesis includes evaluations of interventions that encourage parents to play a supportive role in their children's development. Thus, multi-element programs targeting child and family outcomes, as well as child-focused programs that solely target children's outcomes with more peripheral parent involvement, are included. Six broad child outcomes areas are explored: (a) educational outcomes; (b) internalizing (depression) and externalizing (acting out) behavior; (c) substance abuse; (d) reproductive health; and (e) health and fitness.

These evaluated parenting programs were classified based on program type and their target population.

Program Type

- **Skills training** programs teach parents parenting skills, such as discipline, monitoring, limit-setting, and communication, to change how they interact with their children. Parents are not given activities to practice with their child at home (25 programs).
- **Parent education** programs deliver information about a certain topic, but do not build in opportunities for parents to practice skills or participate in activities with their children (19 programs).
- **Parent-child involvement** programs provide children and parents with opportunities to participate in activities together related to achieving program goals. These programs do not offer skills-training opportunities, and they may or may not teach parents new information (18 programs).
- **Therapy focused on a parent or family issue (parent-focused)**. Programs that provide therapy to address a parent or family issue often teach parents how to deal with their own personal issue (such as parent drug addiction) or with a family-related issue (such as divorce) with the secondary goal of improving parenting skills (five programs).

Target Population

- **Combined focus on parents and children**. Programs with a combined focus on parents and children have intervention components that are specifically designed for parents and for children. These components may be delivered to parents and children in separate groups or in the same group (46 programs).
- **Focus on children, with limited parent involvement**. Programs with a focus on children work primarily with children (either individually or with other children) and involve parents in a limited way. For instance, a program may deliver a well developed, 25-week curriculum for children and involve parents in small ways – by sending home materials that include information about the program, by asking children to practice new skills at home with their parents, or by designing only a couple of sessions for parents (nine programs).
- **Focus on parents, with limited child involvement**. Programs with a focus on parents work primarily with parents and involve children in a limited way. For instance, they may invite children to only one or two of the sessions for the purpose of allowing parents a chance to practice new skills (12 programs).

Cross-cutting themes drawn from all programs are presented first, followed by outcome-specific lessons where applicable.

WHAT WORKS: CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

- **Evaluated parenting skills training programs are generally effective at improving child outcomes:** Of 25 skills training programs, 21 had a statistically significant¹ positive impact on at least one of the following child outcomes. *Among parent skills training programs*, outcomes include:

¹ Reported impacts are those reported by the evaluators to be significant at the $p \leq 0.05$ level. Note that this review does not focus on the magnitude of the impact, though this information is included in the LINKS program summaries.

- Educational outcomes (seven out of 10 programs had positive impacts);
 - Depression or anxiety (eight out of 12 programs had positive impacts);
 - Disruptive behavior (acting out: 10 out of 20 programs had positive impacts); and
 - Substance use (six out of eight programs had positive impacts).
- **Parent-child involvement programs also tend to have positive impacts on child outcomes:** Fifteen out of 18 parent-child involvement programs had a statistically significant positive impact on at least one child outcome (with 10 of these improving health and obesity outcomes).² Overall, *among parent-child involvement programs*, outcomes include:
 - Health and Obesity (10 out of 14 programs had positive impacts, including all five programs that targeted weight loss);
 - Education (three out of four programs had positive impacts);
 - Depression and anxiety (three out of five programs had positive impacts);
 - Disruptive (externalizing) behavior (three out of four programs had positive impacts); and
 - School Adjustment (two out of three programs had positive impacts).
- **Programs with a combined focus on the parent and child generally have positive impacts:** Of 46 evaluated programs, 40 had a statistically significant positive impact on at least one child outcome. *Among programs with a combined focus on parents and children*, outcomes include:
 - Education (seven out of nine programs had positive impacts);
 - Health and Obesity (nine out of 10 programs had positive impacts);
 - Internalizing behavior (depression: eight out of 10 programs had positive impacts);
 - Externalizing behavior (acting out: nine out of 16 programs had positive impacts);
 - School adjustment (three out of five programs had positive impacts);
 - Substance abuse (four out of seven programs had positive impacts)
- **Programs that integrate the use of technology – such as videos, DVDs, telephones, and software programs– in innovative ways (for example, computer-delivered interventions and telephone-based counseling) appear to be effective.** Ten out of 12 programs that integrated technology had positive impacts on at least one child outcome.

WHAT WORKS: THEMES FROM EVALUATED PROGRAMS THAT TARGET SPECIFIC OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

Health and Nutrition

- **Programs that actively involved school cafeterias and their staff were likely to have positive impacts.** As shown in Table 1, all three programs that engaged their school cafeterias or school staffs in changing students' dietary intake improved the nutritional intake habits of children.

Educational Outcomes

- **Parent involvement programs conducted entirely or partially in a classroom setting often improve educational outcomes:** Of the 10 effective programs addressing educational outcomes, 7 were conducted entirely or partially in the classroom.
- **Programs that improved educational outcomes implemented at least 11 sessions.** All seven effective programs had at least 11 sessions of parent-training and/or child-centered components.

² Of these, 8 were successful at addressing nutritional changes, while 5 were successful at addressing weight loss.

MIXED REVIEWS: THEMES FROM PROGRAMS THAT TARGET SPECIFIC CHILD OUTCOMES

School Adjustment Outcomes

- **Programs targeting both the parents and child with a combined focus on both were not consistently effective.** As shown in Table 1, three out of six programs with a combined focus on both the parent and child had a positive impact on children's school adjustment. School adjustment included outcomes such as school bonding, academic competence, school competence, academic self perceptions, school functioning, and academic engaged time (time students spend on academic activities).

Externalizing Behavior

- **Programs that focused on parent or family issues were not consistently effective.** Two out of four programs had a positive impact on children's externalizing behavior.

WHAT DOES NOT WORK: CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

- **Among evaluated programs, parent education programs were not consistently effective.** As shown in Table 1, just 6 out of 15 parent education programs had positive impacts on at least one child outcome.³

Themes from Programs that Target Specific Child Outcomes

Reproductive Health

- **Abstinence-only programs have not been found to have impacts for children.** None of the three abstinence-only programs for children in this age group yielded significant changes in sexual activity or parent-child communication about sexual activity and sexuality.

Substance Abuse

- **Parent-child involvement programs were not consistently effective in preventing substance use in children.** Two out of three programs did not show positive impacts, while a fourth program showed positive impacts for only part of the sample.

Internalizing Behavior

- **Programs that focused on parent or family issues were not found to be effective.** One out of three programs showed positive impacts on children's internalizing behavior.

³ While parent education programs were not consistently effective, they were the only programs targeting children's reproductive health issues that had positive impacts. Of the seven programs targeting children's reproductive health, only two programs had positive impacts. Both were parent education programs: [Saving Sex for Later](#) had impacts on children's attitudes and [Who Do You Tell](#) had impacts on children's knowledge.