

# PARENT EDUCATION: DEVELOPMENTS AND DISCREPANCIES

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## Resume

The effects of professional intervention in family life and relationships has been questioned by a number of writers who maintain that this involvement has led to the undermining of parental authority and a lessening of parental competence and confidence. By contrast, others see this involvement as supplying necessary skills to family members.

Amongst the programmes which professionals have implemented are parent education programmes, many of which are conducted in groups and which are valued by both practitioners and writers. As part of the broader debate about the relationships between professionals and the family however, some critics suggest that parent education programmes can have adverse effects on parents' confidence in their parental role and on their self-reliance in deciding how best to raise their children.

A research project is being put into effect in Melbourne to explore these issues.

## Parent Education – Recent Developments

It is generally recognised that being a parent in the latter half of the 20th century can be a confusing and difficult experience (for example, Stern, 1960; Brim, 1978; Rapoport et al, 1977; Hobbs et al, 1984; Pugh & De'Ath, 1984; Reiger 1986a).

Australia's development as an advanced industrial capitalist society has involved rapid technological, social, and economic changes. These have included the changing economic role of the family and its relationship with the wider community. In particular, there have been changes in family patterns and in the role of women, a decline in frequency of intergenerational family relations, and increased contact through immigration and social mobility between members of different ethnic backgrounds and social classes who have contrasting cultural traditions of childcare. Such changes have meant that many contemporary parents have become isolated from their own cultural traditions

of childrearing and also have often been exposed to a variety of ways of raising their children.

Concomitant with these developments has been the emergence of a class of professional experts who have become involved in programmes concerning personal and family life and relationships. A considerable number of professional specialists and experts are now working in the field of child care and development and family support, and attention has been drawn to the role these professional experts, such as psychologists, kindergarten teachers and doctors, and more recently social workers, have had in changing the patterns of childrearing (Reiger, 1986a; Robertson Elliot, 1986).

Alongside the emergence of the professional experts, much research has taken place this century on child development and behaviour. This upsurge of research and theory has contributed to the belief amongst many persons that there exists some better ways of raising children than many of those prescribed by tradition.

Whilst advice to parents on how to raise their children has always been offered over the centuries, the pressure on families brought about by rapid change, along with the growing research and involvement of professional experts have contributed to the development and expansion of organised parent education programmes.

One of the most recent and comprehensive studies of parent education (Pugh & De'Ath, 1984) found that the term "parent education" appears to reflect two major thrusts: on the one hand, an emphasis on parents' role performance and acquisition of particular techniques; on the other, an emphasis on the personal growth and development of parents and improved communication skills, with a focus on learning rather than teaching.

Discussing the nature of parent education, Brim (1978) points to three basic types of parent education methods – individual counselling, mass media and group discussion. In their National Children's Bureau of Britain Parenting Project 1980–1983, Pugh and De'Ath (1984) established the existence of the same three main types of parent education in the United Kingdom. With reference to developments in the USA, Croake and Glover (1977) claim that parent education and group methods in parent education are practically synonymous.

There is a lack of readily available data on the types of parent education programmes being offered in Australia. Information is fragmented, no formal policies or overall co-ordinating bodies exist, and there is a dearth of research in the area. It would appear, however, that parent group education is a method commonly used in Australia. Eastman (1983) states that many of the major programmes in use in the USA are available in Australia, and Pugh and De'Arth (1984) specifically refer to the popularity of behaviour modification and parent-effectiveness training programmes in Australia. The growing acceptance in Australia of Gordon's Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.) and other newly emerging parent education groups is noted by Davies (1978).

In particular, it seems that structured group programmes are popular. These programmes offer pre-set topics and progression which parents "slot into" (for example, the Systematic Training for Effective Parenting [S.T.E.P.] programme), in contrast to unstructured programmes which offer informal gatherings where emergent issues are discussed (Morandini, 1983). Schultz (1985) notes that in recent years, parent group education has moved away from the traditional unstructured format of free-flowing discussion toward a more structured approach.

The currently more popular structured approaches, applied in a variety of settings and used with divergent populations, vary in their theoretical orientation (Schultz, 1985). Most of the parent education programmes can be classed broadly into two categories – the behavioural and the humanistic.

Behavioural programmes tend to concentrate on specific, observable behaviours, and aim to teach parents how to get children to repeat acceptable behaviours, and discontinue unacceptable behaviours (Grosvenor & Steele, 1984). The emphasis is on the use of positive reinforcement and the first step in modifying the child's behaviour is for parents to change their behaviour (Fine, 1980)).

Humanistic programmes concentrate on thoughts and feelings more than on specific behaviours. They teach communication skills and favour more democratic family relationships. Two well-known humanistic programmes are *Parent Effectiveness Training* (Gordon, 1970) and

*Systematic Training for Effective Parenting* (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976).

In general, the type of programmes being used locally appear to be influenced by the ready availability of these and other packaged programmes, such as *Systematic Training for Effective Parenting of Teens – S.T.E.P. Teen* (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1983) and more recently, *Responsive Parenting* (Lerman, 1984). Recently developed local group education programmes such as the *Parenting Skills Programme* (Paul, 1986) are now also being used.

To summarize, parent education as a growing field of practice involves a diverse range of theoretical orientations, emphases, topics and settings in which programmes are offered. A particular feature seems to be the popularity of parent group education, especially the structured packaged programme which, however, are likely to have varying degrees of structure and which emphasise various principles and skills of parenting.

#### **Discrepancies in effects of parent education programmes on participants**

Although parent education is an area of practice that is likely to continue to grow and develop, there are opposing schools of thought about this value.

Differences in opinion and knowledge exist with regard to the effects of parent education programmes on their participants. In particular, there are discrepant viewpoints regarding the effects of programmes on parents' confidence and on their dependence on professionals with regard to their parenting role.

Parent education programmes do not generally explicitly state their intent with regard to the issues of parental confidence and dependence on professionals. However, it would seem reasonable to assume that implicit in the overall goal of enhancing the parents' abilities to raise their child successfully is the expectation that through participation in a programme, a parent's confidence in their parental role will increase and their need to rely on external sources such as professionals will decrease.

*Parental confidence and independence.* It has long been recognised that parent education should result in increased parental confidence and independence. In 1960, Stern (in Pugh & De'Ath, 1984) argued for parent education to –

“assist parents in the natural process of thinking, understanding, communicating and deciding on matters of child care. It should inspire confidence and encourage in parents a sense of independence and responsibility. (p. 50)”

This viewpoint rests on the assumption that confidence in the parental role, in and of itself, lead to greater effectiveness in that

role and is a necessary step in enhancing parents' ability to raise their children successfully.

Ballenski and Cook (1982) maintain that parents' feelings about their ability to effectively fulfill their parenting role affects their role performance, and cite Chilman's findings that feelings of competence as a parent are significantly related to satisfaction with this role. Eastman (1983) argues that families or individuals who emerge from an educational programme with increased choices, competence and self-esteem are empowered. As Pugh and De'Ath claim, “self-confident parents will surely be better and more effective parents” (Pugh & De'Ath, 1984, p. 53).

Thus, it is assumed that parent education programmes intend to increase parents' confidence and decrease their dependence on professionals and underlying this, that an increase in confidence in parental role is a necessary step in enhancing individuals' parenting abilities.

#### *Decrease in dependence on professionals.*

Another underlying assumption is that it is desirable for parents to decrease their dependence on professionals as a result of participating in a parent education programme. Knowles (1970) contends that a central quest of every individuals' life is for increasing self-direction. As individuals grow and mature their self-concept moves from one of total dependence to one of increasing self-directedness (Knowles, 1978). An experience that moves individuals away from dependence can be said to be educational, and one that tends to keep individuals dependent or make them more dependent can be said to be anti-educational (Knowles, 1970).

It is recognised that there may be times when dependence is appropriate, enabling individuals to ask for support, reassurance or help (Donelson, 1973). This might particularly be the case when a parent first enters a parent education programme. However, adult education theory suggests that it is not helpful to individuals to remain reliant on such support if they are to become more self-directing. Further, excessive reliance is regarded as maladjustive (Donelson, 1973).

On the basis of this argument, it would, therefore, seem reasonable to assume that a decrease in parents' dependence on professionals as a result of their participation in a parent education programme – at least in the longer term – is a desirable effect.

*Relationship between self-confidence and dependence.* Tied to these assumptions is another assumption that self-confidence and dependence are negatively related. It is argued that decreased self-confidence can lead to increased reliance or dependence on others, and conversely

that increased dependence can contribute to decreased self-confidence (Harman & Brim, 1980). This is supported by Hess (1980) who argues that an awareness of their own lack of skills makes parents more vulnerable to voices of authority. Dependence then erodes the parents' effectiveness with their children and feelings of inadequacy make it difficult for parents to acquire new skills. Hess adds that research of learned helplessness shows that experiences and expectations of failure depress the ability to learn, the tendency to take initiative, and increase the desire to turn to others for assistance.

Silver and Wortman (1980) note Cobb's argument that individuals who develop greater self-confidence may be more likely to develop feelings of autonomy.

Only a small number of studies have been found that actually include an examination of the effect of parent education programmes on parents' confidence, and these have been predominantly studies of *Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (S.T.E.P.)* and *Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.)* groups. Even fewer have been found that consider the effects on parents' dependence. Of these studies, several have reported significant positive changes in parents' confidence.

Contrary to the popular but frequently untested acceptance of parent education programmes is a view put forward by a number of writers that questions the overall concept of parent education. Writers such as Lasch (1977), Ehrenreich and English (1979), Donzelont (1979) and Reiger (1985; 1986 a & b) question the “intrusion into the family” of “professional experts”. As Fantini and Russo (1980) point out, critics of continued professional involvement in the child-parent relationship often maintain that the dependency on external sources has greatly inhibited parental authority and confidence.

Within the context that questions the role of professionals, there is in fact a school of thought that suggests that parent education in particular can have adverse effects on parents, undermining their sense of confidence and creating in them dependence on external resources, in particular professional “experts”, with regard to their parenting role (Davies, 1978; Hess, 1980; Katz, 1982).

Whilst some studies of parent education groups reported on by Grosvenor and Steele (1981) indicated no significant change in parents' confidence, their own four month follow-up study found a decrease in the confidence of P.E.T. group participants (Grosvenor and Steele, 1984). Pugh and De-Ath (1984) also reported findings that indicated that professionals are undermining parent self-confidence.

Anchor and Thomason's (1977) study of two separate parent education programmes found that parents in both

courses showed more dependence on others after the courses than before. Also, a review of the results of parent education programmes notes the observations of parents' increased reliance on external experts and decreased self-confidence (Harman & Brim, 1980).

Apart from the above studies and reviews, much of the argument put forward about the possible effects of parent education programmes on parent dependence and self-confidence is based on speculation and theoretical argument (e.g. Davies, 1978; Hess, 1980; Katz, 1982).

Thus it would appear that, although only a limited amount of empirical evidence is available, substantial concerns exist regarding the effect of parent group education programmes on their participants with respect to two particular attitudes: dependence and self-confidence.

### In Summary

Parent education programmes have been developed by professionals in response to the perceived needs of parents striving to raise their children in the complexities of our advanced industrial capitalist society. It is maintained that an important aim of such programmes is to provide parents with greater confidence in their parental role and to lessen their need to depend on professionals to assist them in this role. However, a contradiction emerges as to whether this is actually occurring. What appears to be happening is that parents may in fact experience a fall of confidence in their parental role and find themselves increasingly reliant upon professional helpers in deciding how best to raise their children - consequences that are considered to be counter-productive.

In order to contribute to our understanding of the parent education movement and to improving the experience of parenting in the late twentieth century, a research project is being put into effect in Melbourne to explore the development and significance of selected parent group education programmes, with particular reference to their effects on parents' confidence and sense of independence.

It is anticipated that the research project will involve the exploration of the above issues with those people involved in various parent group education programmes in Melbourne, both group leaders and participants. The writers would welcome any comments from readers who may be interested in aspects of the research programme.

\* the research reported on in this article is being undertaken by the principal author as work towards a Master of Behavioural Science at LaTrobe University, Melbourne.

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