



Enhancing parenting skills, knowledge, and behavior through a strong, statewide network that promotes and improves parenting education.

Parenting Education Access & Barriers Parent Focus Groups Report

These focus groups comprise one of three information-gathering methods to develop a better understanding of availability and access, gaps and barriers in parenting education in our state. Parenting education providers' perceptions about those topics also were elicited through a written survey. As of this writing, we also re conducting forums with child-and-family serving agencies to seek their input. Data from all three information sources will be compiled into a summary report that will be made available to NYSPEP, our colleagues, and state leaders during 2011.

Report prepared by Brittani Hanson
Prevent Child Abuse New York
NYS Parenting Education Partnership Coordinator
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Overview

This report summarizes the development and findings of ten focus groups designed to identify access and barrier issues of parenting education in New York State. The New York State Parenting Education Partnership (NYSPEP) conducted a series of two-hour focus groups over a five-month period, two in each of the NYS Office of Mental Health's five regions: Central, Western, Hudson River, Long Island and New York City. The combined groups included more than 100 participants, caregivers who have received parenting education voluntarily or by mandate, some who had not, some who were unaware of its existence, and a relatively large proportion of parents who have children in the Mental Health System.

Focus Group Dates & Locations

08.04.2010 NYC, The Children's Center	09.29.2010 Utica, Kids Oneida
08.09.2010 Bronx, Prospect Family Inn	10.04.2010 Hempstead, Nassau County
08.23.2010 Canandaigua, OMH	10.13.2010 Selden, MCPL
09.10.2010 Buffalo, EPIC	11.30.2010 Middletown, FEC Inc.
09.16.2010 Watertown, NRCIL	12.02.2010 Albany, Families Together

Background

Objective: To conduct a series of parent¹ focus groups where caregivers could identify the access barriers and discuss needs for parenting education in the various regions across New York State in which they reside.

NYSPEP, in collaboration with the New York State Office of Mental Health and Families Together in New York State, gathered information through ten Parent Focus Groups from August 2010 to December 2010. One purpose was to identify needs in parenting education, so programs can better serve families in their regions. The other was to identify barriers, as a first step to solving access issues across the state. The information is being shared with providers to help assure that all parents will have access to the parenting education they need. These providers include but are not limited to: parenting educators, prenatal experts, social services, early childhood, daycare providers, and K-12 educators.

Process: Two focus groups were conducted in each OMH regions of the state; up to 20 individuals could register for each two-hour session.

Questions for the groups were developed by a Parent Advisors Panel, individuals affiliated with Families Together, NYS Office of Children and Family Services and NYSPEP. Comprehension levels of the prospective attendees were taken into consideration and questions were constructed to be simple and relevant to all parents. Broad, open-ended questions were used to give parents a chance to elaborate. Also, a needs assessment was integrated into the questions.

¹ Not to be narrowly defined as biological, in this report, "parents" encompass all types of caregivers including but not limited to; kinship caregivers, foster care and adoptive parents, etc.

Any parent or primary caregiver was eligible to participate, whether or not they'd taken part in parenting education. Each received a \$20.00 stipend for completing the session; dinner and childcare were also provided at each location.

The groups included individuals who had received parenting education voluntarily or by mandate, and those who had not - and may not have been aware of its existence. A large number have children in the Mental Health System. Upon arrival, parents were given an explanation of the guidelines for focus group conversations, practicing "safe space" and using the pass option and "I phrases." Introductions of the facilitators and attendees followed. Every participant was asked to introduce him or herself and speak briefly about his/her children.

After a first set of questions posed to the entire group, attendees were broken up into two groups: those who have attended a parenting education class and those who have not. Finally, the groups reconvened to share their findings and made recommendations as a group. Parents were assumed to be the experts on access in their region; they provided recommendations and opinions about programs as well as identifying basic needs.

Focus Group Questions

Part I

1. What has been the most memorable/important moment in parenting for you?
2. What has been the greatest struggle in parenting for you?
3. Had you heard about parenting education programs before today?
 - a. If you have "Yes", how did you learn about parenting education in your community?
 - b. If "Yes", when you heard about parenting education, did you see value in attending?
 - c. If you haven't attended a parenting education program, why haven't you?

Part II-Breakout Session

Groups who have attended a Parent Education Program:

1. What did you find most valuable/helpful in your parenting education program?
2. What did you feel you wanted more of?

Groups who have not attended a Parent Education Program:

1. What would you find most valuable/helpful in a parenting education program?
2. What beliefs/opinions have you had about "parenting education programs"?

Part III-Report out and final discussion question

1. What could be done differently, or kept the same, to encourage your participation in parenting education programs?

Key Findings

Common themes emerged in the focus groups, varying from similar access barriers to repeated requests that specific needs be fulfilled.

Access Barriers: The main barriers to taking part in parenting education parents cited were time constraints, monetary issues, transportation, childcare, and locations. Those who were familiar with parenting education suggested that class times were are too limited (some working night shifts, others working day shifts); transportation and eligibility were also major issues. Parents who were unaware of parenting education programs felt that was due to a lack of marketing. Suggestions were made to promote classes in local doctors' offices, grocery stores, schools, newspapers, popular family restaurants, gyms, and preschools. If there were more awareness about parenting education, other than programs related to the court systems, more and more parents would attend.

Parents were interested in seeing parenting education classes that are open to the public at local schools, in order to avoid the court-mandated stigma of parenting education. Many viewed parenting classes as an obligation for parents who get in trouble rather than a helpful tool to learn parenting skills.

Parents talked about a major disconnect between educational institutions (elementary, middle and high schools) and organizations that conduct and coordinate parenting education. The greatest barrier seems to be communication. Teachers, school nurses, coaches, and superintendants need to play a stronger role in family and community education. That idea was extended beyond educational institutions; health care facilities, libraries, gyms and etc. should be active in promoting the health and education of families.

Needs Assessment: Childcare, transportation, and meals being provided were most commonly mentioned. Parents felt those would not only increase attendance, but also are needed for parents to feel comfortable, because they would not have to worry about childcare or feeding their children in order to attend. Another common theme was the need for parenting educators who are well versed in cultural diversity and accepting of different cultural traditions in parenting.

The importance of cross-systems collaboration also emerged from parents' discussion of needs. They noted that it would be more encouraging if their family advocates, social workers, doctors, and school teachers were all familiar with the same information and worked together. For example, parents of children with special needs found it difficult that social workers and teachers were unaware of diagnoses. More often than not, this subject led to discussion of parental rights; parents were interested in classes that explain their rights in communicating with schools and obtaining information about their children's academic performance and behavioral issues.

Other needs were also mentioned in various groups: receiving education - prior to giving birth or shortly thereafter - about behavioral disorders and the warning signs, pre-birth classes for parents explaining the Adverse Childhood Experiences study, nutrition education, anger management techniques and ways to appropriately discipline children.

In addition, parents in some groups suggested obtaining more help for addicts, individuals released from prison, and military service members reintegrating into family life; classes for kinship caregivers and for parents of homosexual children; a website that includes information on parenting education classes, general tips for parenting, and resources to refer to; and that parents occasionally act as a co-educator, for example having parents that have faced particular struggles, or had particular success, help present the program.

Finally, a strong need was expressed for continuing follow-up after parenting education courses have been completed. They yearned for discussions with the instructor or other parents about what worked, what didn't work, and problem solving. The idea of classes continuing to meet as a discussion support group seemed to be greatly desired.

Regional Findings

NYC Region

Manhattan: Six people attended the focus group at The Children's Center. Family advocates and school assistants had alerted the parents about the group. One third were homeless, one of whom was residing at a drug rehabilitation facility. Drug use seemed to be a common issue for the individuals in this group. A major theme was the desire to have a better reintegration process for families after experiencing homelessness, foster care, or drug rehab, for example, including the children in various steps to rehabilitation, encouraging visiting hours. Finally, time was a major constraint for all these parents. They expressed that they "haven't had time to attend parenting meetings."

The most memorable moments in parenting for the group ranged from watching their children make mature decisions, the first time they held their children, to "being a parent, the whole process, you don't forget it."

Many of the struggles these families experienced related to behavioral issues, frustration, custody battles and separation anxiety.

What could be done differently to encourage participation?

The parents suggested dividing participants into groups where the general needs would be similar, educators having cultural competency, and providing different programs for different cultures.

Prior Participation

Parents who had attended parenting education classes found value in providing childcare, food services, hands-on activities, material resources distribution, and a sense of care and concern. This group desired more family based activities in the classes, resources for dealing with the school systems, follow up classes, support groups and bilingual services.

Some of the parents agreed that they had preconceived notions about parenting education classes because they had a “bad experience with ACS.” Those who had attended mandated classes realized there is a benefit to attending.

No Prior Participation

Parents who had not attended parenting education classes explained that they were not looking for classes; however, they did not mention knowing about them.

These parents felt they would find value in parenting education that offered assistance with raising children in broken marriages, information for parents to understand the emotional stability of their children, cultural knowledge/acceptance, and providing childcare.

Bronx: Ten people attended the focus group at the Prospect Family Inn. A majority were fathers recommended by Bronx Works, an agency that works specifically with fathers by aiding them with job searches and advocating for their parental rights. All but two were familiar with parenting education, mostly by way of court mandates.

The most memorable moments in parenting for the group were cutting the umbilical cord, graduation day, participating in the delivery of the child, and watching a child’s reaction to the world.

Many of the struggles these families were dealing with related to losing control, inconsistency within education and law enforcement institutions, finding an acceptable school to enroll their children in, obtaining legal advice, and, most commonly, unemployment.

What could be done differently to encourage participation?

An overwhelming majority of the group suggested that there should not be a stipend for participation, only travel reimbursements, childcare, and a light meal. They attested to the fact that they would have attended despite receiving the stipends. All of the men were in agreement with the statement of one father, “The ones that care will come no matter what.”

This group was very interested in continuing to meet as a whole and possibly conduct community events and support groups for families and children to bond. As they said their final farewells, there was talk of organizing a community softball game for families in the Bronx.

Prior Participation

Parents who had attended parenting education classes found value in gaining understanding about teenagers, listening skills, appropriate quality time with children, no cost activities, knowing you aren't alone, and how the brain works.

The group desired more parenting workshops within the school system and community, more visitations/representation, more advocates to help parents navigate the court system, workshops dealing with stress/frustrations, and how the male brain develops vs. the female brain.

No Prior Participation

Parents who had not attended parenting education suggested that there was "No particular reason why (not to attend), even if you think you're a perfect parent doesn't mean you can't learn." Another parent chimed in suggesting, "Some need it, and everyone should do it at least once."

The parents suggested that in a parenting class they would find the most value in realizing they aren't alone, learning how to deal with various situations, developing a support group, and having a general place to ask questions and get answers.

Central Region

Watertown: Nine people from Lewis and Jefferson County attended the focus group at the Northern Regional Center for Independent Living. The majority were providers themselves with children in the Mental Health System. The spectrum of children's disorders varied from autism, ADHD, PTSD to depression and anxiety. Sexual abuse and generational incest were also a strong presence in this group's discussions; many families had experience with varying levels of sexual abuse; one was dealing with sexually abused children whom they adopted.

The most memorable moments in parenting for the group consisted of finally identifying proper diagnoses, watching their children's expressions, and picking the child up from the hospital.

The struggles these families were dealing with often stemmed from situations within the community. A common theme was the lack of communication between schools and parents. The parents were concerned that the schools are not equipped to teach and support children with mental health issues. Also, they experienced public scrutiny on a regular basis. There seemed to be a lack of understanding by individuals in the community when a child was having an outburst and the parent was attempting to control the situation. Parents spoke of situations where bystanders would comment that if they were better parents, their children would not act out.

What could be done differently to encourage participation?

Parents suggested that transportation and childcare be provided. They also mentioned addressing stigma's, specifically, the stigma that an individual that

doesn't have a typical child is a bad parent. They felt that the views of parenting education need to change, and educators should not look down on parents.

Prior Participation

Parents who had attended parenting education classes spoke highly of the parenting education course *Love and Logic* by Cornell Cooperative Extension. They found value in the structure of classes, real-life examples, strategies to remain calm, materials to refer back to when issues arise, and the feeling of not being alone.

The group desired more information about strategies to deal with specific behaviors, support groups, and an Internet site that recommends additional classes based on the needs of the parents. Another suggestion was follow-ups; the parents had a strong desire for the educator to follow up after completion of the class to offer coaching on techniques learned.

No Prior Participation

Parents who had not attended parenting education suggested the reason they hadn't was the belief that "they will say that I'm not raising my child right and they will tell me what to do." Also, an individual's religion may come into play if hosted in a church, a deterrent for some parents.

They said they would find the most value in learning different parenting strategies, exchange of ideas between parents, classes for parents with children of the same diagnoses, and a checklist on how children are behaving. A major discussion for the fathers was about the desire for a class that prepares them for typical teenage behaviors, including sexuality and rebellion.

Utica: Twenty people attended the focus group at Kid's Oneida. The majority heard about the group from Kid's Oneida, Family Resolution Center, Evelyn's House, Proctor Senior Community Agency and Head Start. This group was particularly diverse, ranging from teen moms to kinship caregivers, parents with children in the mental health system, married couples and single parents.

For this group, the most memorable moments in parenting ranged from watching children grow to "every moment," potty training, taking the *Common Sense Parenting* classes, co-parenting and, most commonly, giving birth.

The struggles they experienced included dealing with fathers denying a child, financial issues, mastering discipline with typical and atypical children, being a teen mom, custody battles, and navigating the court systems. One parent said, "Trying to be devoted and dedicated to work but still being the best parent you can be; wishing to be cloned."

What could be done differently to encourage participation?

The group identified transportation, childcare, and meals for the families as incentives. They suggested marketing classes in grocery stores, schools, and

doctor's offices. A major request was diminishing the stigma attached to parenting education. Other suggestions were mandating classes for all parents, longer classes (parents felt rushed), interesting topics, continued support after the course ends, marital counseling with child involvement, and more communications between agencies. For example, all of the services a family is participating with - including, pediatricians, psychologists, school teachers, parenting educators and social services workers - should be informed of their needs.

Prior Participation

Parents who had attended parenting education classes spoke highly of Common Sense Parenting, Kids Oneida, Herkimer BOCES, and the Family Nurturing Center. They heard about parenting classes through their jobs, neighborhood centers and referrals by CPS. These parents found value in repeating classes, the materials that were distributed, dual parenting programs, role playing and learning different techniques to use with children.

The group wanted more education about medications, religion or a moral basis classes, anger management, more up-to-date materials, and techniques to prevent abuse. This group was also adamant about facilities hosting groups for children to discuss their wants and needs; they felt children need to be heard and should be able to connect with others their same age or with the same diagnoses.

No Prior Participation

Parents who had not attended parenting education suggested it was due to the lack of knowledge about them. One single father from Madison County mentioned he had been looking for services and assistance but there were none that served the area in which he lives. He is a full time parent with a full time job and a daughter with Downs Syndrome who uses sign language to communicate. Therefore, the main reason for not attending class was his lack of access. Parents also expressed beliefs that parenting education is used as a punishment (court mandated) and only parents in trouble with the system are supposed to attend.

The parents said that they would find the most value in learning about soothing babies, dealing with their child's disabilities, and child development with and without disabilities. Parents with both a typical child and a child with disabilities seemed to struggle with discipline and desired a course on disciplining both types of child in one family. Also, the parents expressed a strong need for agencies to communicate and work together to better serve families, not just compete for attendees.

Central Region Parent Advisor Feedback/Recommendation:

Transportation is always difficult as is childcare. But other important things heard at the focus groups were difficulty in finding choices of parenting classes, and wanting them to be taught by parent professional team. Also families wanted to be able to learn and apply techniques and be able to meet for follow up sessions to discuss success or new strategies if not successful. All of the families want to be

successful in their parenting skills. Knowing that a group is working with parents to help them be successful shows more respect for the efforts to attend than just having parents read materials or listen to what professionals think, which could seem critical of their past efforts. I think parents are more likely to attend and to participate in follow up meetings if they feel part of a group, rather than an attendee of a program.

Long Island Region

Hempstead: Ten people attended the focus group in Nassau County. Five had four or more children. The majority had multiple children in the mental health system with diagnoses ranging from ADHD, PDD, bi-polar disorder, PTSD, and Aspergers to depression, anxiety and schizophrenia.

The most memorable moments in parenting for this group included seeing their child receive school achievement awards, watching their baby smile, finally diagnosing their child, and watching children grow and learn.

Many of the struggles the parents experienced have been with understanding their child's disorder, getting people to listen to what they had to say about their child's behavior, and showing the children that they are trying to help them.

What could be done differently to encourage participation?

The parents suggested that there should be childcare, transportation and varying meeting times to accommodate the different schedules of families, for example offering night and day trainings. They also noted that the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) training class is invaluable and that there needs to be more training to address the medical community's understanding of the emotional piece. They requested more classes include the medical community, police officers, and teachers, to train them to deal with specific types of problems, like autism outbursts. Parents felt agency providers need to work together and coordinate services so services do not overlap. Other suggestions were having more crisis hours, more resource choices for crisis, offering Common Sense Parenting more frequently, providers marketing mental health in a more positive manner, and promoting events through the media.

Prior Participation

Parents who had attended parenting education classes mentioned they learned about the classes through parent support groups, the local PTA, the Family & Children's Association, Long Island Advocacy Center, Mother's Center, school therapists, and North Shore Child & Family Guidance. These parents found value in NAMI basic training, peer interaction, respite, support groups, role-playing, and listening to other parents. They especially enjoyed classes that gave them homework, specifically, tasks to complete with their children. It also was helpful when they were shown strategies on how to get their children to do their homework, how to negotiate with their children and picking their battles.

They would have liked to see more empowerment of others and encouragement to pass it on. It was also suggested that classes, including the NAMI training, be available to the general public. This group felt that professionals do not always have the experience and parents do, therefore, they feel parents and professionals should be working together.

No Prior Participation

Parents who had not attended parenting education suggested it was because they felt they did not need the help and/or they were not aware help existed. Some received support from speaking with other parents and felt that was all the help they needed. One person stated, "It would have been nice if I knew about it way back when. You feel very alone. People blame parents when their children are not sleeping and not eating breakfast."

The parents suggested that they would find the most value in parenting support, workshops on navigating the school systems, how to prepare for the Committee on Special Education (CSE), and workshops about testing for disabilities. Several were also interested in classes that would identify what rights they are entitled to as a parent.

Selden: Six people attended the focus group at the Middle Country Public Library. The needs assessment for this group differed from many others. There was much less concern about the financial burdens that many parents in other groups expressed. The group consisted strictly of women, one an aunt and another a foster parent.

The most memorable moments in parenting for the group were giving birth and feeling connected to their children. One woman specifically mentioned, "a drawing my child made that was a photo of parents with hearts around them, and just knowing that my child is showing the feeling of love." Others spoke of their child's first words, and the aunt cherished the first time she gave her niece a bath when she had an overwhelming feeling of love.

The struggles the women experienced in parenting were keeping calm, being a good role model, discipline, and dealing with children of all ages. One particular struggle a mother expressed was, consistency between her and her husband. She has a mental illness and she didn't realize how sick she was and how that could play a part in her children's life; they internalize her reactions and behavior.

What could be done differently to encourage participation?

The parents suggested that there should be more marketing for the classes and that schools should be working with parents. Follow-ups after completion of classes were strongly desired; parents felt they deserve more feedback after trying the strategies they learned. Also, they felt that there is a need to break down the barriers from parent to parent, to make them more willing to speak about their issues.

Prior Participation

Parents who had attended parenting education classes mentioned Common Sense Parenting, Horizon Classes through the Counseling Center, Town of Smithtown Court referrals, and word of mouth references to particular classes. They found value in classes with simple rules and directions and passionate parenting educators. They all agreed that it was helpful knowing you were normal and others were going through similar situations. The mothers felt the classes were more effective when they were given homework and expected to finish it. Activities to show parents how their child perceives them were also something they found valuable.

They felt they would have benefitted more from separate classes for men and women because their thought processes are not the same. Also, they would like to see follow-ups after the completion of the classes and repeat groups for everyone to meet and discuss how things worked with their children.

No Prior Participation

Parents who had not attended said it was because they believed that parenting education was strictly for court ordered individuals. They suggested that the programs they would find most valuable would be ones that offered anger management, respite services, and workshops on understanding boundaries for your children. They also expressed the opinion that everyone should have to participate in a class before becoming a parent.

Western Region

Buffalo: Thirteen parents attended the focus group held at EPIC (Every Person Influences Children). They learned about the focus group from various sources, including the Connor Center, Cornell Cooperative Extension and other parent participants. This was another very diverse group of parents including caretakers, married couples, single parents, parents with mental illness, adoptive parents, and a parent of a homosexual son. This was the first time the notion of parenting education for parents with LGBTQ children was brought up.

Their most memorable moments in parenting varied from spending time with children on the holidays, to diagnoses, observing the moral traits that were instilled in the children, and watching their children follow their hopes and dreams. One parent spoke of the moment her son came out and admitted he was a homosexual at the age of 13.

Some of the struggles the parents faced were discipline, becoming a new parent, dealing with child obesity and handling children with self-mutilation issues. Many of the parents commented about looking for help and not always receiving it. The most common place most of these parents went for information was the school system, which was unable to provide the help they desired. Many felt the schools should be more equipped to handle issues with parenting.

What could be done differently to encourage participation?

The parents suggested that there needs to be better ways of marketing the information about the classes, for example, using a school to host a program and advertising to the teachers, local hospitals, and at the nearest grocery stores. A suggestion was made by several parents to partner with businesses to hold parenting classes during lunch hours; they felt it would cut down on the problem of time being a deterrent. This group also suggested that children should have a program at the same time as the parents attend programs, and that the children learn coping skills and how to express their feelings to their parents.

Prior Participation

Parents who had attended mentioned they learned of parenting education through agencies such as EPIC, the Conner Center, and mental health facilities. One parent mentioned that the high school she attended held parenting education classes. She found this very beneficial because most people do not discriminate against the school systems; they are institutions that were established to provide education of all sorts.

They found value in gaining a support network of other parents who were experiencing similar challenges. One parent mentioned, “The coming together and spreading of ideas of what works and what doesn’t between the parents and the children is helpful.” Many parents also valued the time to get out of the house and socialize with other parents. More specifically they valued programs that provided repetition of topics, help finding services, and childcare.

Most felt they would like to see more parenting education programs with lower costs, follow-up services, stipends, transportation, childcare, parents as co-presenters and more structured time for parents to exchange ideas. They also wanted more programs on legal issues surrounding parenting children with special needs, and classes recommending how parents deal with school systems and the severe lack of notifications parents receive about their children’s behaviors.

No Prior Participation

Parents who had not attended parenting education felt that there was value in attending but some felt that men aren’t welcome. They would like to see a greater appeal to men; one father said, “The discussions are always based around females and parenting.” The idea was brought up that there could be separate groups of men and women to discuss issues and then reconvene to talk about what each group discussed. Also suggested were classes for parents with LGBTQ children on how to deal with judgments and communication with the child. There are few or no parenting education classes that address LGBTQ issues in a safe environment where families can speak freely.

Canandaigua: Fourteen people attended the focus group held at the Ontario County Mental Health Building. They ranged from grandparents to parents with special needs children diagnosed with Tourettes Syndrome. A fair majority were caring for

one or more special needs children. Many were notified about the focus group through social workers and the Finger Lakes Parent Network.

Their most memorable moments in parenting varied from becoming a grandparent/parent, to the birth of the first child and watching their kids grow up.

Some of the struggles these parents faced were with school systems, not being able to obtain help, dealing with judgment, stress, and managing behaviors. Dealing with judgment seems to be a common theme among parents of special needs children. They feel as though others look down upon them because they cannot control their children.

What could be done differently to encourage participation?

The parents suggested that agencies should target specific groups of parents and offer classes that would attract them, for example, classes for parents with special needs children, single parents, married couples, etc. They also suggested offering a greater number of classes and distributing information through advertisements. One mother said, "Try having parenting education at school districts after school so families, faculty and staff could attend and learn about disabilities and how families feel and cope. It would be a different learning experience for all. Parents would see schools' points and interests, and school would see parents' concerns & frustrations. I think you would find more parents there that need extra help but don't know where to go."

Prior Participation

Parents who had attended classes mentioned they had been aware of parenting education programs such as Family to Family, NAMI, Common Sense Parenting, the Incredible Years, and Family Talk. They seemed to value most knowing that others were going through similar experiences, common sense parenting, learning new perspectives, learning about conferences, and optimism.

They mentioned wanting more interaction between parents after attending classes, role-playing, and more hands on activities. They also wanted more real-life strategies to be addressed in parenting education; they felt there were too many hypothetical situations.

No Prior Participation

Parents who had not attended parenting education felt that there was value in attending the classes but none were ever offered to them, or they felt that the programs did not pertain to them. This group spoke about the stigma that is attached with parenting education and that all programs require time, money and transportation. They also related attending classes to feeling like a bad parent and held fears that educators would judge their parenting.

If they were to attend a parenting education program, they thought they would value learning ways to calm children down, stress management, and varying class

times. They also would value a 24-hour parent help line. Childcare, transportation, and a meal of some sort were considered imperative. Some said they would find great value in educators who are sensitive to different cultures, learning levels and generational gaps. Also, continued support after the classes have been completed and as the child grows was seen to be beneficial.

Western Parent Advisor Feedback/Recommendations:

Barriers to participation were what we expect to see: transportation, distance to the class, registration fees, time of class, class not meeting current needs, not knowing classes exist, stigma; fear of what classmates might think, as well as trainers, and who sees me walking in the door; family care needs not only for the diagnosed child and sibs but other family members as well, especially in homes where grandparents are the care givers or there is an elderly parent; not recognizing a need for taking a class, parental learning disability or literacy needs, and cultural appropriateness.

To address the barriers, marketing is huge one. One parent brought up being excluded from class because she was a middle class working parent who was not on some form of assistance. Exclusion from classes meaning that some are not open to everyone in the community, or are aimed at people who it is assumed lacked skills or income; income eligibility was an issue.

Hudson Valley Region

Albany: Fourteen people attended the focus group at Families Together in New York State (FTNYS). They heard about the focus group from Unity House, Head Start Brighter Choice, Unity Sunshine, Lincoln Square, Trinity and FTNYS staff. This group included several parents with deceased children, an issue that had not been brought out in other groups. Several providers attended to participate and observe.

The most memorable moments in parenting for the group ranged from experiencing the birth of their children to spending quality time, funny moments, and watching school accomplishments.

Some of the struggles the parents faced were “maintaining my cool and realizing my triggers”, trusting others, and consistency in parenting. Most of the parents were “worrying about them growing up.” Another recurring issue was discipline. One person stated the biggest struggle was, “keeping the faith after giving my daughter up for adoption.” The atmosphere of the group seemed to be one of trust; many individuals shared stories.

What could be done differently to encourage participation?

The parents suggested that in order to gain more participation in parenting education, provision of child-care, transportation and meals would help.

Prior Participation

Parents who had attended parenting education mentioned the programs through CPS (Child Protective Services), Healthy Families, Parsons, Alpha Center, St. Peter’s and Unity House. What they valued most in these programs were the stages of

development, discipline techniques, self-reflection, and anger management. They also found it beneficial to learn how to get involved in their children's education and appropriate ways to have discussions with children.

Within the programs they attended, they would have liked continued support and communication from the educators and tips on how to stay consistent when you parent. Transportation and childcare should be offered at all programs to increase accessibility for parents. Parents were also looking for more tips on preschoolers, toddlers, teens, and dealing with the court systems.

No Prior Participation

Some parents who had not attended parenting education expressed beliefs that an individual were bad parents if they attended a program, or that they are doing something wrong and someone else would like to correct them. Others felt it would be a place to share ideas with parents and learn new tips. Some said they felt it was sufficient to rely on family for knowledge about caring for their children.

If they were to attend a program, they would find value in learning different discipline techniques, and ways to engage and educate their child. There was some interest in coping with role reversals of mothers and fathers along with dealing with challenging childhood experiences. A majority agreed they would like programs to provide resources to help children benefit from community experiences and to teach them stress management.

Middletown: Nine people attended the focus group held at the Family Empowerment Council Inc. Many who attended the group knew with each other. Some sources they referenced when asked how they heard about the group were HeadStart, Yscoop (local after school flyer) and FTNYS staff.

The most memorable moments in parenting included when their children were born, the first sign of the child communicating, and watching their children as they make important accomplishments. More specifically, parents mentioned, morning feedings with their infants, and hearing from others that their children were well mannered, affirming they were doing something right as a parent.

Some of the struggles these parents faced were dealing with mistakes children have made, establishing a healthy diet, and most commonly, going to stores such as Shop-Rite or Walmart. Parents mentioned that not only was it hard to keep their children obedient, but others give judgmental looks that make them feel unworthy as a parent. One couple discussed their issues with a child who would misbehave at home and present a perfect demeanor elsewhere, offering the idea of, "Street Angel, House Devil." Finally, many parents agreed it was difficult to keep their patience.

What could be done differently to encourage participation?

The parents suggested that in order to gain more participation in parenting education there must be childcare, transportation and meals offered at the program.

Marketing was a major issue; parents were unaware when programs were being offered. They suggested putting the information in well-traveled supermarkets, doctor's offices, and schools. There was a strong desire for programs to be offered at the schools themselves and also for Spanish-speaking individuals who could help with translation.

Prior Participation

Parents who had attended parenting education classes said they found value in learning coping skills, how to multitask, patience, and following through with treatments and punishments. One parent found the class homework very beneficial; it consisted of saying "I love you" and taking parent time-outs. Overall everyone found value in having a support group to refer to during hard times.

The parents felt they would have liked programs to include mentors for the children, respite for parents, and for educators to be more understanding about issues the parents are having. This group, like many others, requested parallel groups with parents and children working together on behaviors and issues. In addition, workshops on teenagers were highly desired.

No Prior Participation

Parents who had not attended parenting education suggested the main reason was lack of awareness. They indicated that if someone is not receiving assistance they are less likely to hear about parenting programs and support services because most programs are not widely advertised.

They did say they would find value in attending a parenting program. Some of the suggestions for what they would most value included learning from other parents, peer groups, and a wide array of information on ways to solve different problems. They were looking for workshops on how to discipline, where to find guidance, how to deal with picky eaters, and how to better educate their children. Also, parents mentioned difficulty dealing with family members who do not respect the way they would like their child raised. They were interested in a program that allowed parents and family caregivers participation. Finally, it was mentioned that it would be valuable for programs to offer free books for parents to read with their children, or show the families how to use the libraries and the services they have to offer.

Conclusion

These parent focus groups established a set of basic needs for parenting education programs. They also helped to identify access barriers parents in all regions are affected by. Although the needs and experiences varied across the regions, some barriers remained the same through all of the focus groups: childcare, transportation, and meals.

Particular differences stood out among the regions. For example, those attending the NYC regional groups seemed to put an emphasis on teaching their children the necessary skills for survival; one father said, "I teach my children how to survive." On the other hand, the Long Island region was more concerned about who attends parenting classes; there was a major request to keep those who were willing to attend separate from those who were court mandated. Also in Long Island there was greater reliance on libraries for parenting education; it was the only location where parents cited repeated use of libraries' parenting education activities.

There were three major reasons parents hadn't attended classes: they were unaware of them, time constraints, or they were not concerned until they started having issues with their children and found they needed help.

The major unexpected theme that came up in all groups was the difficulty parents face in dealing with schools and teachers. Parents mentioned they would go to educational facilities for help, advice, or to get information about their child's performance, and would receive no guidance. These parents were upset by the fact that teachers were not aware of parenting education in their local community and by the lack of resources and help they could provide.

Recommendation

Parenting education programs must strive to provide the basic needs parents request in order to attend courses. If agencies are unable to fulfill certain needs, they can attempt to partner with other community based organizations to provide childcare, transportation, and meals, for example utilizing local head start workers, churches, libraries, and DSS workers. Marketing needs to be a major concern for parenting education programs. If parents are not aware classes exist, obtaining continued support for parenting education will become more and more difficult.

In addition, parenting education programs should partner with schools to host programs for the public. After-school programs are another venue parenting educators could take advantage of, before parents pick up their children, there could be group sessions several times a week. Some topics parents could learn more about are anger management, parental rights, identifying behavioral disorders, and discipline skills. Most important, this would be an opportunity for parents to show children that education and knowledge is powerful and no one is ever finished learning and growing, not even their own parents.

A final recommendation is to continue to conduct parent focus groups to stay current in understanding needs and barriers to access. Parents have the best insight about the particular needs and barriers in their regions. Speaking with the experts, parents themselves, makes identifying needed changes more simple.