

## Practice Point: Implementing Parent Education Programs

This practice point provides some guidelines for implementing home-based parenting education programs with parents with learning difficulties. For more information on designing parent education programs read the Practice Point: Designing Parent Education Programs.

### **Key facts**

Effective parent education programs have parents involved in the implementation. The relationship between educator and parent should be a partnership, acknowledging that each person can be a resource to the other.

The family's environment and the characteristics of family members must be considered when implementing a parent education program. Each family is different and has different strengths and challenges. The individual context of each family will influence the effectiveness of a program.

### **Practice tips**

- Use appropriate teaching materials
- Incorporate teaching activities into the program that are meaningful within the context of the person's home. That is use teaching examples from the family's home and daily lives.
- Present material that is useful and relevant to the parent's needs and experiences. Break up complex skills into small steps for the parent to learn one at a time. Ask the parent how they learn best. Get the parent's views on the program you are delivering. Do they like it? Do they like the way you are teaching them? Do they prefer things to be written down? Would they like more time to practice in sessions?
- Use visual aids as prompts for learning. Realistic pictures or video are useful to prompt learning of new skills.
- Build in opportunities for repeated practice, without being repetitive. For example, teach skills in different locations or use different materials.
- Self-instructional pictorial, audio or video materials can be helpful for learning. The parent can use the materials in their own time, learn at their own pace and can use the materials as many times as they like.

### **When to have sessions**

- Parent education programs work best when sessions are regular and frequent (e.g., weekly or twice weekly) and parents have the opportunity and support (other people, videos, etc.) to practice between sessions.
- Plan sessions so that parents can participate actively and learn practical skills.
- Plan "booster" sessions for skills that the parent may need additional support to use, after the teaching has finished.

- Promote generalisation of skills from one child to another or from one setting to another. Teach the skill in a number of ways with different children present, in a variety of places (e.g. the home, the park, grandmother's house).

### **Monitor the parent's learning**

- Start the learning process with a small goal that can be easily achieved by the parent. This is particularly useful if the parent is feeling discouraged, perhaps because of a lack of progress or previous criticisms of their parenting. Small successes can build a parent's confidence and show them that they can succeed.
- Provide opportunities for parents to monitor and reinforce their own learning.
- Monitor progress in a way that is meaningful to the things you are teaching. For example, can you see a change in the way a parent is interacting with their child? Is the kitchen clean? Is the child putting on sufficient weight?
- Focus on one or two areas for teaching at any one time.

### **Use appropriate language**

- Provide verbal information in clear, direct and short statements.
- Repeat information using various methods (e.g., verbal instruction, role play, coaching). It may be necessary to repeat newly learned information over several visits.
- Use praise or other types of reinforcement when the parent performs a skill well. Use whatever type of reinforcement works best for that particular parent.

### **Check parent's understanding**

- Ask the parent to explain to you what they think the new information means - this will help you to know whether they have understood (view the online Checking for Understanding Tipsheet).

### **Be flexible and respectful**

- Be flexible in response to disruptions and distractions in the home environment. Although the home offers parents the opportunity for individualised, context-specific learning, there is the reality of working in a home with young children. Be flexible in managing frequent distractions. To minimise these inevitable distractions, schedule home visits during school hours or when the baby is sleeping, provide children with food and entertainment before the session starts and include children where possible.
- Be aware of how social experiences of people with learning difficulties affect their attitudes towards learning. For example, negative experiences at school may influence their attitude to learning.
- Be respectful of parents' authority in their own homes and their priorities and immediate needs.
- Be aware of the parent's ability to make changes. Some parents have little or no control over the home environment and feel quite powerless to apply the knowledge they have learned. Thus practitioners need to be aware that the effects of home visiting programs will be moderated by the parent's degree of control over the household.

- Assess the impact of the attitudes and behaviour of significant other people in the parents' lives. If they are helpful use these people to support the parent in learning new skills. When these people are a negative influence in parents' lives, work with the parent to find ways to work around these people.
- Work with significant others to help them understand the importance of the program and the information and skills it teaches.
- Be prepared to continually reflect critically on your own personal values and assumptions and to guard against the trap of 'knowing what is best for all parents'.
- Be aware of what other services may be doing with the family. Does it overlap with your work?

### **Parent readiness to learn and apply knowledge**

- Parents vary greatly in their readiness to learn and apply knowledge, and their past experience seems to be an important factor here.
- When previous learning experiences are characterised by failure and negative judgements, or when parents' behaviour is being monitored by child welfare authorities, educators need to be particularly encouraging in helping parents get started on the learning activities. Be aware of parents' previous experiences with learning (either in the school system or informally) and be prepared to adapt strategies and offer plenty of positive feedback. Be open to and interested in life experiences of parents, their family and friends so that these can be used in teaching and learning activities.
- Assess parents' abilities and tolerance for learning 'on the run' and be flexible enough to adapt teaching sessions accordingly.
- Be aware of the influences of cognitive limitations on learning.
- Be sensitive to individual learning styles and preferences of parents and adapt sessions accordingly.
- There are often competing needs and priorities of parents and educators. For parents, the relationship with their educator and the opportunity to discuss their immediate concerns may be more highly valued than the program activities. Parents may feel the need to air personal issues before being able to concentrate on the task at hand. This means educators need to allow plenty of time for the home visit, be good listeners and provide practical support, advice and information. Further, educators will need to be flexible enough to fit into parents' sometimes hectic routines.

### **Improve your own knowledge**

- Build good rapport with parents and develop knowledge about their lives and experiences in order to effectively relate these to the parenting education program.
- Know about child health, development and safety issues beyond the topics covered in a time-limited parenting education program.
- Be familiar with theories and sequences of child development.

### **Want to know more?**

Visit [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au) for tried, tested and trusted information about children's health, sleep, behaviour, eating, physical activity, family relationships, raising teenagers and much more.

### **References**

Content adapted from: Australian Family and Disability Studies Research Collaboration (2004). In Practice: Parent Education.

Victorian Parenting Centre (2003). Best practice in parenting education: Understanding and supporting parents with Learning Difficulties.