

Best Practices in Prevention

What Makes Parenting Programs Successful?



By Jessica Stiffler

If you've been in the prevention field long enough you've heard that targeting parents is a key component to helping young people abstain from alcohol, tobacco and other drug use. Many parenting programs see no participants because parents and caregivers fear their attendance will label them as bad parents in their community, school or workplace. According to Belinda Basca of the California Governor's Program Safe and Drug-Free Schools Technical Assistance Project, efforts to plan, create and sustain a successful parenting program need to be:

Voluntary

- Parents who are voluntarily involved are more receptive and likely to change their behavior.

Intensive

- Programs that have frequent meeting times and occur over a longer time period are more likely to see results.
- Encourage parents to hold weekly family meetings to assist with family communication patterns and to sustain the effects of the program.

Flexible

- Successful programs gear content and methods to the interests and needs of parents and provide a variety of techniques for parents rather than a "one-way" approach. This can be challenging when implementing a science-based curriculum.

Suggestions: Allow guest presentations to supplement the curriculum. Choose a variety of speakers and solicit input from the parents or caregivers as to whom they would like to come and speak during the program.

Culturally sensitive

- Successful programs value diversity and reflect an appreciation of the cultural and socioeconomic bases of parental behavior while avoiding stereotyping.

Suggestions: Serve diverse menus of food to attract families with varying backgrounds. If a class has a mix of parents who speak different languages, conduct the meeting in groups by first language where parents can relate to each other. Provide mini-trainings on parenting in the participants own language. Utilize bilingual parents to assist in the translation of parenting material.

Strength-based

- Successful programs build on family strengths and seek to empower by encouraging parents to find solutions to their own problems.

Suggestions: Train staff to be facilitators rather than teachers/educators. Have parents take ownership of the classes rather than doing all the work yourself. Have parents coordinate providing snacks and scheduling meetings. Keep a collection of items (photos, newsletters, quotes from parents) and have the parents create a scrapbook of their experiences. Use the book as a recruitment tool for future groups.

Responsive

- Effective programs respond to the unique needs of families.

Suggestions: Take time to talk one-on-one with program participants (either face-to-face or by telephone) to ensure that the program is meeting their needs and brainstorm ways to improve if necessary. Schedule meeting times that are most convenient to parents. Set up a “buddy system” where experienced parents mentor and support newer parents.

Accessible

- Successful programs are delivered in a variety of settings, including homes, schools and community buildings, with transportation or childcare provided when needed.

Suggestions: Provide gas cards, bus tokens or taxi vouchers for program participants. Recruit additional staff or trusted youth to provide childcare services.

In addition, successful programs have:

Well-trained staff

- Successful programs are provided by staff that are well-

versed in the subject matter, have good interpersonal and facilitative skills, and are sensitive to family needs.

Suggestions: When using an evidence-based curriculum, make sure all staff are properly trained and have ongoing contact with the program developers as questions and issues arise. Consider staffing the program with former participants. Let families teach and educate staff on cultural issues. Have staff conduct a debriefing after each session to assess how the session went and identify any areas for improvement.

Connection to other community services

- Effective programs collaborate and coordinate with other community organizations to ensure families are receiving non-duplicated services.

Suggestions: Conduct outreach to agencies that families are in contact with, such as the low-income housing authority, mental health services, and/or church and community groups. Outreach to various support groups for parents such as those for single parents, recovering alcoholics, parents of children with ADHD, etc. Consider having speakers from various community groups or service organizations give presentations to the group.

Creative recruitment strategies

- Successful programs use a variety of recruitment strategies, including personal contacts, newsletters/flyers to schools and other community agencies, and networking/outreach with community agencies to solicit referrals.

Suggestions: Form an alumni parent group to help recruit other families. Encourage current participants to recruit other parents and caregivers. Approach community centers and give presentations at PTA meetings and back-to-school nights.

Various methods of service delivery

- Choose programs with a variety of techniques to deliver the highest quality of services.

Suggestions: Utilize discussion groups to give parents an opportunity to interact with others and develop a support network. Provide parents realistic expectations for children at varying levels of development. Choose programs that use role-playing, modeling and demonstrations rather than lecture-only curriculum.

Check out the Model Program Showcase on Prevention First's website at prevention.org to obtain more specific information on parenting programs such as Guiding Good Choices and Strengthening Families.

Stiffler is Professional Development Resource Specialist for Prevention First.