

[Theoretical and Issues Forum]

Parent Education: Revision and Vision

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This article revisits the purpose, nature, and meaning of parent education and foresees alternative practices for changing times. The article first reexamines the common conceptions of parent education and identifies the dominant themes underlying parent education. The revisit reveals a need to develop a contemporary vision and a new focus of parent education. This article suggests to reconceptualize “parent education” as “parent empowerment” and to transform parent education from a “private issue” to a “community responsibility.” It further suggests that parent education practice should shift from “knowledge inoculation” to “whole-person development.” The form of practice is to move from “professionalism” to “partnership.”

Parents are the earliest and closest mentors of their children; the views, values, and attitudes of parents have an enormous impact on their children’s development. Effective parent education is, therefore, critical. If we are going to provide an adequate parent education service, we need to have a vision of its goals. This article identifies the common conceptions of parent education, examines the ideology and assumptions about parent education, and addresses the limitations of the contemporary practice. This revisit leads to the redefining of the meaning and goals of parent education — that is, to reconceptualize “parent education” as “parent

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empowerment” so as to recognize parents’ strengths, competence, and possibilities for change. It further suggests that parent education practice should shift from “knowledge inoculation” to “whole-person development” and to move from “professionalism” to “partnership.” Finally, this article addresses the family-state relations in parent education and the crucial importance of community climate in child development. A supportive, non-blaming community climate and a non-judgmental culture is essential for parent education to be more successful.

Common Conceptions of Parent Education

A literature review reveals that three dominant perspectives have shaped conceptions of parent education: (1) the parent-mediated perspective; (2) the systemic perspective; and (3) the parent empowerment perspective.

Traditionally, parent education practices have been dominated by the parent-mediated perspective: parent education is viewed as a process of imparting appropriate knowledge and skills to parents to improve parent-child relationships and, consequently, children’s development (Mahoney, Kaiser et al., 1999). Studies (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rollins & Thomas, 1979) have identified many links between a child’s psychopathology and the parent-child relationship. These studies support the views that parents play an important role in the development and maintenance of psychopathology in children (Hetherington & Martin, 1986), and that changing child-rearing practices, improving family communication patterns, or changing parents’ cognition are effective responses to misbehavior in children. Most authors agree that poor parenting is usually characterized by non-supportive or authoritative parenting style (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Gray & Steinberg, 1999), judgmental, distracting, and devaluing communication (Alexander, Waldron, Barton, & Mas, 1989), parental inconsistency (Fletcher, Steinberg, & Sellers, 1999), or parental over-control (Lin, 1997; Weller & Luchterhane, 1977). This perspective

perceived improvements in children's behavior as mediated by parents. As a result, a number of parent-mediated educational programs were initiated to help parents change their parenting attitude and methods.

Most popular parent education programs available today have adopted the parent-mediated perspective. Their goal is to train parents to be more effective teachers of their children. For example, behavioral modification programs (Alvy, 1994; Dembo, Switzer, & Lauritzen, 1985; Lamb & Lamb, 1978) based on social learning theory assume that human behavior is learned in social interaction; thus, children's misbehavior represents inadequate learning, and their parents should be taught ways to eliminate undesirable and strengthen desirable behaviors in children. Parent education programs based on Adlerian psychology assume that a child's misbehavior reflects a need to belong, and parents are taught to support and create a positive relationship for better child development. In Parent Effectiveness Training courses (Gordon, 1970, 1980) based on humanistic psychology and client-centered parent education (Lamb & Lamb, 1978), parents are told that the most effective means of influencing their children's behavior are listening actively, and showing respect and acceptance of the child's feelings. In rational-emotive parent education (Ellis & Harper, 1975; Lamb & Lamb, 1978), parents are challenged to question their own irrational beliefs and to train themselves to think and behave more rationally, so that they will react more appropriately to their children's behavior.

The second dominant perspective of parent education, which is based on recent developments in family studies, involves conceptualizing parent-child relationships in terms of larger family systems (Belsky, 1990; Belsky, Rovine, & Fish, 1989; Stafford & Bayer, 1993) and the social context beyond family boundaries (Peterson & Rollins, 1987). Proponents of this perspective point out that parent-child interaction is bidirectional rather than unidirectional (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992), and that a

child's development is influenced not only by parents, but also by other family members and people outside the family. They advocate an interactive or systemic perspective on parent education (Mahoney, Kaiser et al., 1999; Turnbull, Blue-Banning, Turbiville, & Park, 1999). Parent education programs take a wider view, focusing on the dynamics of the family and the relationship between family members. Like the parent-mediated perspective, the systemic perspective considers that the goal of parent education is the strengthening of the family to create better outcomes of children (Mahoney, Kaiser et al., 1999; Turnbull et al., 1999). Parent education practices operating from this perspective also view parents as the agent and children as the targets of change (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992).

The third perspective to parent education, which has emerged from theories of empowerment (Solomon, 1976, 1987), emphasizes recognizing and respecting parents for fulfilling their responsibilities competently. It emphasizes on the importance of family empowerment as a means of developing appropriate strategies to solve family problems (Fine & Lee, 2001). This perspective is particularly suitable for parent education for disadvantaged families and families with special need children (Le Gacy, 2001; Vernberg & Pavon, 2001). The Families First program, which is based on the Homebuilders model (Kinney, Haapala, & Booth, 1991), the Home Start program, where parent volunteers work alongside professional workers (Shinman, 1996a, 1996b), and the Video Home Training parenting program, which focuses on the communication patterns of family members (Gerris, Van As, Wels, & Janssens, 1998), are examples of parent education programs based on the empowerment perspective. Although many advocates of parent education (Gerris et al., 1998) favor the empowerment perspective, this perspective is relatively unpopular due to the supremacy of parent-mediated perspective.

The Dominant Assumptions Underlying Parent Education

Two central themes emerge from the examination of existing perspectives of parent education. The first is the nurture assumption (Harris, 1995; Lykken, 2000). It maintains that children are shaped and socialized primarily by the guidance and modeling of their parents, and, therefore, family environment plays a significant role in child development. Parenting is not a self-sufficient and self-sustaining act, but is inherently directed toward the well-being and functional behavioral development of a child. People who are inadequately socialized tend to become incompetent parents and produce inadequately socialized children who, in turn, become incompetent parents (Lykken, 2000).

Various studies have examined how family and parental factors predict child development (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Otto & Atkinson, 1997; Rollins & Thomas, 1979). Many links have been discovered between youth crime and child psychopathology on the one hand, and parental psychopathology, the parent-child relationship, and the family structure on the other. Since it is believed that improving family environment, child-rearing practices, and family communication patterns will diminish child psychopathology, parent education programs focus on discouraging dysfunctional parental practices (Abidin, 1976a, 1976b; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rollins & Thomas, 1979), improving parent-child communication (Gordon, 1970, 1980), and strengthening the relationship between parents (Haley, 1971; Minuchin, 1974). Parents are responsible for creating a healthy family life and should be educated in effective parenting. Proponents of the nurture assumption believe in the critical influence of parents and advocate the idea of parental licensure (Lykken, 2000; Westman, 1994).

The second theme is the notion of education. Theoretical and empirical reviews demonstrate the strong influence of the education model on parent

education, especially those programs that are based on the parent-mediated or systemic perspective. This notion of education reflects the influence of the compensatory education model (Robinson, Rosenberg, & Beckman, 1988). The foremost goal of parent education is to teach parents a more functional child-rearing style and appropriate strategies to solve family problems (Fine & Lee, 2001).

According to the *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1988), education is "the process of training and developing the knowledge, skill, mind and character" (p. 432). The term "parent education," then, suggests a unilateral transfer of information, knowledge, and skills from teachers to learners, from professionals to parents, or from helpers to those needing help. The educational view of parent education is closely related to the nurture assumption, both of which hold that parental and familial functioning are related to children's functioning (Lamb & Lamb, 1978), and that it is essential for parents to have knowledge and skills to fulfill their roles (Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie, 1998; Mahoney, Boyce, Fewell, Spiker, & Wheeden, 1998). Parent education has been defined as "systematic activities implemented by professionals to assist parents in accomplishing specific goals or outcomes with their children" (Mahoney, Kaiser et al., 1999, p. 131).

The nurture assumption has been criticized for ignoring the impact of poverty, community subculture, and genetic factors (Harris, 1998), and for laying all the blame for children's problems on parents (Gerris et al., 1998). The education model of parent education has also been criticized for holding parents entirely responsible (Gerris et al., 1998), as well as being narrow and outdated (Dunst, 1999; Winton, Sloop, & Rodriguez, 1999). These criticisms of the nurture assumption and the education model have serious implications for the development of parent education and suggest a pressing need to develop a new vision of parent education.

Reconceptualizing “Parent Education” as “Parent Empowerment”

The first task in developing a new vision of parent education is to reconceptualize its definition. Although “parent education” has been used extensively in recent decades, its connotations are quite negative. First, “parent education” conveys an implicit message that parents possess inadequate, inefficient, or insufficient abilities that are in need of remediation (Winton, Sloop, & Rodriguez, 1999). It suggests that parents lack the knowledge required to rear children adequately. In fact, parents are sensitive to these implicit criticisms and many parents react negatively to the concept of parent education (Greene, 1999). The term “parent education” failed to recognize parent competence; it was considered insulting and eventually fell out of favor (Dinnebeil, 1999; Winton, Sloop, & Rodriguez, 1999).

“Parent education” implies certain assumptions about the direction and type of interactions between parents and professionals. Professionals are experts who have knowledge to be the teacher, whereas parents are inadequate and need to follow the instruction of the experts. The relationship between parents and professionals (Barrera, 1991), the role conflict for parents (Hanson & Hanline, 1990; Vincent & Beckett, 1993), and the potential cultural bias of parent education (Hanson & Lynch, 1995) are all suggested by the inherent bias of “parent education.”

“Parent empowerment” is a more appropriate term. Empowerment is conceptualized as a process by which individuals gain increased control over their lives (Parsons, 1991; Rappaport, 1981). “Parent empowerment” suggests that all parents have strengths and capabilities, including the capability to become more competent (Rappaport, 1984). The goal of parent empowerment is to activate the strengths, competence, and possibilities for change that exist in parents and in the social context. According to Singh, Curtis, Ellis, Nicholson et al. (1995), empowerment

can be accomplished by access to knowledge, skills, and resources. An empowered person is able to “negotiate the human service delivery system, efficiently utilize it to meet their needs, and finally transcend the need for assistance from it” (Curtis & Singh, 1996, p. 504). The empowerment framework no longer defines parents as passive service recipients but active and competent change agents. Parents will become active participants in the care and service provided to their children and will self-empower during the process (Singh, Curtis, Ellis, & Wechsler et al., 1997).

In addition, the empowerment framework pays attention to the satisfaction of the parenting experience. The parent education paradigm unintentionally ignored the joy and satisfaction of being a parent. Many people find the experience of parenting gratifying, enlightening and often exhilarating, but these positive experiences have been ignored. Coleman and Karraker (1998) conducted a comprehensive review of literature on parenting ability and confidence. They assert that self-assurance is strongly related to parental ability, and that confidence enhances parental competence and positive child outcomes. The awareness of their own capabilities helps parents to develop a sense of pride and reinforce good parenting practices. By shifting from a didactic paradigm to an optimistic one, the concept of parent empowerment promotes the joy and satisfaction of being a parent, as well as giving parents a sense of competence, achievement, and self-sufficiency.

Shift From “Knowledge Inoculation” to “Whole-person Development”

In the modern era, knowledge based on rationality, science, and structure has demonstrated its effectiveness and power (Mohan, 1993, 1995, 1996). However, scientism and rationality — putting emphasis on technique factors over relationships — promote dehumanization (Mohan, 1997). Under the influence of scientism, contemporary parent education programs highlight skills and techniques. This reflect the dominant

mentality of instrumental rationality. Scholars (Alexander et al., 1989; Barber, Chadwick, & Oerter, 1992; Herold, Mantle, & Zemitis, 1979; Lin, 1997) indicates that in parent education programs, the skills and technique factors are emphasized and there are a wide range of standardized, ready-made training packages for parents to obtain behavioral skills in helping their children. It is well known, however, that parenting is not merely knowledge and skills; one does not become an effective parent simply by acquiring knowledge and skills. Study results (Tam, Lam, Cheng, Ho, & Ma, 2001) indicate that the emotional and personal problems of parents are major obstacles to effective parenting, and that children's problems reflect the inner struggles of their parents. In determining the meaning and scope of parent education, we need to adopt a broader perspective that goes beyond the level of skills and takes into account the values, attitudes, and emotional background of parents. "Parent education" should encompass the ideas of "whole-person development" and "parent growth." It should aim to develop the human capitals of the family and to address parenting ideologies and values.

Moving From "Professionalism" to "Partnership"

To preserve their identity as valuable service providers, professions are often creating their own unique practice domains, specializations, and boundaries. Professionalism involves establishing and possessing a particular knowledge paradigm. However, in the process of developing "professional knowledge," professional systems become monopolies and professional persons assume the position of experts. The expert-oriented and all-knowingness stance on handling family issues is wicked and the professional approach to parent education has created resentment. It conveys the message that professionals have the knowledge to be the teachers and parents are only students who need to follow the instructions and advise of the experts. As a result of this negative message, parents become passive service recipients and the provision of parent education is unidirectional — from professionals to parents.

During the past three decades, professionals have been criticized on this mode of professional practice (Dunst, 1999; Winton et al., 1999). It has been acknowledged that parents are, in fact, the experts on their children and that the explicit instruction on parents is incompatible with the empowerment philosophy. Moreover, parents do not want to be perceived as needing “help” even when they may actually want the service (McBride & Peterson, 1997). Finally, parent education assumes a one-way flow of information, but it has been shown that professional-parent relationship is more successful when it is perceived as a collaborative venture (Winton et al., 1999).

To involve more families for parent education, it is essential to adopt a perspective that empowers family members and takes into account the social environment in which the family is situated. The general goal of this paradigm is to let families work out their problems by addressing and mobilizing forces within and/or around the families themselves. This approach emphasizes respectful partnerships with families with the provision of emotional and educational supports (Burton, 1992; Dunst, 1990), working on problems and goals defined by parents (Lee, 1994), parents and professions working together in a realistic, collaborative relationship based on mutual trust, respect, and commitment (Foreman & Marmar, 1985), giving parents the opportunity to self-determine (Parsons, 1991) and to decide which of the available services best meets their needs (Bailey, 1991; Burton, 1992; Murphy & Lee, 1991). The partnership relationship respects and dignifies the role of parents and does not convey the notion that parents are deficient. It aims to establish collaborative relationship with parents, to involve parents as equal and active partners, to recognize the central and long-term importance of the role they play, and to acknowledge the existence of intervention services to help people achieve their goals and fulfill their responsibilities as parents (Mahoney & Wheeden, 1997).

Transforming From “Private Issue” to Changing the Cultural Climate

The moral issues raised by family-state relations have a direct bearing on parent education. The distinction between private and public spheres of life established a framework for conceptualizing parent education. In all societies, parents have legal or quasi-legal obligations to care for and bring up their children. In most modern societies, parents are not allowed to educate their children in whichever way they choose. There are general rules regarding child-rearing practices. A moral theory of parenthood (Blustein, 1982) is also there to regulate the relations of parents to children. Parenthood and parent education are understood in terms of parental duties and responsibility. This moral perspective on parent education assumes the priority of parental duties over parental rights (Locke, 1971) and parental duties being private and fundamental, thus placing an intolerable burden on parents. Actually, this moral theory of parenthood is vital in understanding the Chinese parenting practice. Under the strong influence of the Chinese familism, the Chinese believes that family and parenting issue is a private sphere. These Chinese sayings explain clearly the Chinese views on parenting and family issues: “If the offspring was not taught properly, it was the father’s (parents’) responsibility/fault,” and “Family wrongdoings should not be disclosed.” The Chinese have maintained a clear idea about family boundary and parental duties for their children (Wu, 1996).

Although parents have duties and obligations, parenting is never a purely private endeavor. The community and the larger ecological context are also of crucial importance in the psychological development of families and children. A healthy extra-familial context, an encouraging community climate, and the positive cultural values surely help to foster better child development. There are some aspects of family life and children’s development for which the state and the community are held responsible. In response to these responsibilities, the government needs to initiate

policies and legislation, and devote resources to parent education programs to foster a healthy environment for child growth and development. The government should also encourage organized actions, social groups, and grass-roots movements to give support to families and children. In other words, it is the responsibility of the macro systems to establish a supportive, non-blaming community climate and a non-judgmental culture to enhance family and child development.

Implications for Practice, Research and Education

The proposed vision attempts to redress the shortcomings of the existing conceptions of parent education and will have significant implications for practice, research, and education. As regards practice, it reminds us that only offering parents a single option of education to enhance their children's development is too restrictive. It therefore suggests a broader perspective to parent education. The notions of "whole person education" and "parent growth" alert us to the importance of "family-centered" (Mahoney, Kaiser et al., 1999) and person-focused practice rather than skill-focused training. The strengths and empowerment perspectives remind us to focus on assessing and working with family strengths rather than deficits.

Moreover, in this fast-changing era, we, as practitioners, should realize and appreciate diversity and ambiguity. When working with families, we should be aware that there is no set arrangement for childrearing that is objectively optimal or even desirable. Therefore, providing standardized behavioral training packages for parents and encouraging the conformity of parental action to certain standards of behaviors do more harm than good.

Besides, the revisit reminds us that parents not only have parental duties but also have parental rights and competence. In working with parents, we need to value and dignify their role, to respect their parental

independence and freedom of choice, and to have a high regard for their parental competence. Since parents are adults, professionals must understand the core constructs of adult learning and avoid teaching and imposing. If parents do not feel that their input is valued, or if they feel that they are being judged and evaluated, the impact of parent education is likely to be negative. Parent education must be provided as though it were a matter of course, with no stigma attached. Encouraging a sense of empowerment and developing a partnership relationship are the ingredients for success in working with parents.

Parents are not the sole agent to hold responsible for the well-being of children. All the key partners, such as schools, social service agencies and mass media, have a role in enhancing the child and family's quality of life. They are both the potential providers and recipients of education, resources, and support in a mutually reciprocal fashion. The community, the parent educators and the parents should work together cooperatively within the social context to establish a supportive culture for parent empowerment.

We now turn to the implications for research. Knowledge comes from practice; practice and research are inseparable (Peile, 1993). A literature review in parent education shows that there is, especially in Hong Kong, little documentation of contemporary family life and its emphases. Without such a knowledge base, service planning only responds to the surfaced problems. In the last two decades, family practitioners have developed knowledge based on their practical experience; however, this knowledge has not been properly documented or systematically organized. There is a pressing need to conduct pertinent research on local families, in terms of family profiles and other relevant characteristics, and to develop parent education strategies that meet the special needs of families. Professionals must recognize the importance of knowledge accumulation and should develop evidence-based practices to generate new knowledge.

In the training of parent educators, it should be stressed that parent education is not a single discipline; it involves many disciplines, including social work, education, nursing, and popular culture. Practitioners must develop a holistic view of the family and its social context. In an increasingly complex world, professionals must recognize and admit that they may not know the solutions to all the problems they encounter. In our training programs for family practitioners, we need to encourage the following three qualities: (1) a dynamic perspective that is sensitive to the complex local and global context; (2) an open attitude to appreciate diversity and uncertainty and to explore alternatives; and (3) a humble heart showing sympathy and respect for service recipients, and willing to act collaboratively with parents and families.

Conclusion

The review of the major conceptions and assumptions of parent education reveals the shortcomings of its theory and practice, as it stands. This article advocates the adoption of a broader definition of parent education, one that encompasses the notion of parent growth, that reconceptualizes parent education as parent empowerment, that moves from a professional relationship to a partnership, and that transforms parenting by changing the cultural climate. We believe it is time to reevaluate, critically and globally, the vision of parent education. It is hoped that the vision proposed in this article will promote a dialogue about new forms and strategies of parent education in the near future.

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家長教育：修訂與前瞻

本文探討家長教育的目標、性質及意義，從而釐定未來的工作方法。文章首先審視家長教育的主要理念，找出家長教育背後的主旨。結果顯示，家長教育需要有一個更合時宜的視野和焦點。本文建議將「家長教育」的概念理解為「家長充權」，並將家長教育由「私人事件」轉化為「社區責任」。文章更建議家長教育的重點應由「知識的灌輸」轉變為「全人發展」，而推行形式則由「專業」走向「夥伴合作」。