New Parents as Teachers

To enhance children's educational prospects, we need to reach them early—during their first three years—and through their first teachers, their parents.

In 1981, the Missouri State Department of Education hired us to design a model parent education program and to help implement it at four different sites. The success of the New Parents as Teachers program has been so remarkable that the Missouri legislature has made the availability of parent education mandatory in the state. As the word spreads, we expect to see other states doing the same.

How did this come about? A fair amount of credit goes to some very dedicated people in Missouri, including the state's director of early childhood education, the commissioner of education, a representative from the Danforth Foundation, and the then incumbent governor (who became a first-time father in his early forties).

The New Parents as Teachers project teaches parents to set up interesting environments for their children, to allow them to indulge their natural curiosity, and to follow whatever leads the children provide. Here, a parent educator conducts a group get-together at the project's resource center.
Credit also is due to the very talented parent educators who staffed the initial programs. The rest of the credit can go to our research of the last 20 years on the early learning process and how parents can help their children get the best possible start in life.

The Lessons of Project Head Start
Prior to 1965, very few people thought that any significant learning took place before a child entered school at age five or six. However, largely in the context of the civil rights movement that blossomed during the early 1960s, an increasing number of parents and professionals came to the realization that many children—particularly those from low-income, minority communities—were already educationally disadvantaged at kindergarten age and were destined to perform poorly in the classroom. In 1965, the federal government initiated Project Head Start, a nationwide network of center-based programs for three- to six-year-old children, designed to ensure that they would not miss out on important preschool educational experiences evidently available to their more fortunate peers.

Unfortunately, from an educational standpoint, Project Head Start and its various spin-off programs, such as Home Start and Follow Through, have failed to accomplish this goal. A handful of well-funded, carefully designed programs staffed by highly trained personnel (such as David Weikart’s Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Michigan) have demonstrated that under special conditions such programs can achieve modest success. However, while the children apparently were somewhat better off than they would have been had they not participated in these programs they still were not exhibiting even average, much less superior, levels of achievement during the school-age years.

Project Head Start did succeed in demonstrating two points very clearly. First, most of the children headed for scholastic difficulty at age six and beyond are by age three already significantly behind their peers in terms of intellectual and linguistic skills. Rather than giving children a “head start,” these programs are more likely helping them “catch up.” Second, such remedial work is extraordinarily expensive, difficult to do, and, even under the best of circumstances, not likely to completely reverse early losses.

The Harvard Preschool Project
Our research with the Harvard Preschool Project also began in 1965. However, unlike Head Start programs, our interest went beyond children from poor families heading for problems in school to helping all children achieve the best possible start in life. We were also interested in social, as well as academic, aspects of development.

In the early stages of our research, we focused on preschool children who, by anyone’s definition and in everyone’s opinion, were “most likely to succeed.” These children came from a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, but they all shared intellectual, linguistic, and social skills that clearly set them apart from their average and below-average peers. We soon realized that these children were exhibiting an impressive pattern of abilities by the time they were three years old.

We then went to their parents to find out which ones had another child coming along. When the new siblings were between one and three, we went into their homes every other week and recorded all we could about their experiences and the childrearing practices of their parents.

Later we took what we had learned from these “successes of nature,” combined it with the research of others like Piaget, Hunt, and Anssworth, and then translated it into information and support programs for new parents. In addition to our early, university-based efforts, we joined with a local school district in conducting a special parent education program known as the Brookline Early Education Program. Through these experiences, we gained additional knowledge about early development, as well as expertise in working with diverse young families.

The Center for Parent Education

The educational consequences of the experiences of the first three years of life contribute heavily to lifelong development.

The practice of offering little or no preparation or assistance to the child’s parents often leads to more stress, reduced pleasure, and educational losses for all involved.

Although much research remained to be done, it was possible to implement effective programs, as much reliable and useful information existed that parents and professionals simply weren’t getting.

With this motivation, in 1978 we established the Center for Parent Education, an independent, nonprofit organization based in Newton, Massachusetts. We had two primary goals: to increase public awareness of these issues and to provide resource, consulting, and training services to professionals concerned with the education of children during the first three years of life, especially those interested in working with parents in their role as their children’s first and most important teachers.

Subsequently, we had contact with thousands of grassroots parent education programs that were springing up throughout the United States and Canada. Unfortunately, most government agencies did not respond with the same enthusiasm. At the federal level, Project Head Start continued to receive nearly all the money and personnel allocated for early education. While its educational track record remained weak, the fact that it was focusing attention on a long neglected segment of the population and channeling much-needed funds into their communities made it politically popular and powerful. At the state level, the inertial effects of doing things as they had always been done were strong, and key decision makers still felt that there was insufficient evidence for changing the traditional approach to education.

The Missouri Initiative

In the late 1960s two Missouri women became determined that their state would lead the country into a new educational era. From the end of that decade and throughout the 1970s, Mildred Winter, the state’s director of early childhood education, and Jane Paine, a representative of the Danforth
Foundation, conducted an extensive and exhaustive political and public relations campaign aimed at getting Missouri to commit some of its educational resources to the kind of programs we were advocating. Eventually, they were joined by Arthur Mallory, the state commissioner of education, and Governor Christopher Bond. By 1981, the stage was set for Missouri’s New Parents as Teachers project.

We selected four school districts (urban, suburban, small town, and rural) to host the initial programs, which were to be based on our model of an ideal parent preparation and support program. Together, the families they served approximated a fair representation of the total population of Missouri, covering a wide socioeconomic spectrum and a variety of cultural backgrounds. The program was open to all first-time parents, and a thorough outreach effort was conducted to ensure that all segments of the population were included and to avoid “self-selected” samples.

Using mostly federal funds, over which the state department of education had discretionary power, and contributions from local school districts, we hired two full-time parent educators to serve between 60 and 100 families in each district. Also, employing mostly unused elementary school classroom space, we established a resource and operations center at each site. Through a grant from the Danforth Foundation, we were contracted to provide the parent educators with specialized training, help equip the resource centers, prepare the sites for operations, and supply guidance and supervision for the entire effort. By January 1982, services to families were begun, which continued for three years.

The Structure of the Program

Services offered to the families featured group get-togethers at the resource center, where 10 to 12 parents would meet with a parent educator, and private home visits, in which a parent educator would meet one-to-one with parents. Services began during the third trimester of pregnancy and continued until the child’s third birthday, with increasing emphasis on private visits after the child was five or six months of age. The average amount of contact with families was once a month for an hour to an hour-and-a-half.

Comprehensive educational screening services were provided to monitor each child’s intellectual, linguistic, and social development, and an extensive referral system was instituted to promptly provide parents with any special assistance they might require. In other words, the parents were virtually guaranteed that their children could not develop an educational problem without knowing about it immediately and receiving appropriate information about where and how to get help. Since the staff maintained a strict identity as educational specialists only, this referral system also helped the parents with monetary, marital, medical, or other noneducational problems.

Furthermore, the parents had access to the resource centers, where they could examine an extensive collection of books, magazines, toys, and other materials relating to early development and parenting, and obtain guidance from the staff regarding the evaluation and selection of potentially useful items. They also could meet with other new parents and even take advantage of cooperative babysitting arrangements, which would enable them to have regular (and often requisite) time off from their childrearing responsibilities.

The Content of the Program

Through the group and private sessions, the parents were given basic information about what children are like at different stages of development and what sorts of things help or hinder their progress. They were shown videotapes demonstrating typical behaviors of infants and toddlers, and they received curriculum materials that outlined the interests and abilities of children at each stage of development, suggested appropriate activities, and alerted them to new developments to expect in the upcoming stages.

The information and advice conveyed through these mechanisms were neither highly elaborate nor overly extensive. Since we were interested in promoting well-balanced, all-around development, we did not advocate high-pressure procedures designed to produce precocities in specific areas. Unlike the many “infant stimulation” or “superbaby” programs that have sprung up in recent years, we focused on a comfortable style of parenting that would make the early educational process enjoyable, as well as effective. We felt that a highly intensive, structured set of specific activities might dampen the children’s intrinsic interest in learning and take a lot of the fun out of the daily interactions between parents and children. The following are examples of information that we shared with the parents:

Language learning. All too often, attention to early linguistic development focuses on children’s speech. We knew from our research that, although many well-developing children do not say very much until they are almost two years old, their capacity to understand simple words and instructions usually begins to develop between six and eight months of age. Since most sane people tend not to talk to things that don’t talk back—such as chairs, fire hydrants, and babies—many parents miss out on several months’ worth of opportunities for teaching language. In homes where children were developing impressive linguistic abilities, we noticed that the parents had talked to them a lot from birth.

Moreover, once the children began exhibiting signs of language awareness, the parents did not engage them in vocabulary exercises using flash-
cards, labeling books, or other such devices. They simply waited for the many daily instances when their children approached them for comfort, assistance, or to share their excitement over some new discovery. At these times, they would respond to their children, using simple language to expand upon what the children were focusing on.

Intellectual development. "Doing what comes naturally" can be counter-productive at times. For instance, when children reach the second half of the first year, they start crawling and climbing. They enter a period when accidental falls, poisonings, and other serious mishaps are apt to occur and when they may wreak havoc with plants, china, and other valuable items they encounter. Many well-meaning parents react by restricting their children to a small but safe area, such as a playpen. They provide "educational" toys to keep the children occupied and occasionally let them loose for carefully supervised "learning" sessions.

However, in homes where children were developing impressive intellectual abilities, we noticed that their parents took a different tack. Rather than restricting their children, they simply redesigned their homes, making most of the living area safe for (and from) newly mobile babies. In this way, the children were given access to a large and interesting learning environment. They could explore, investigate, and experiment with a world of exciting and enriching objects and experiences virtually at will.

Those parents were good observers of their children and were usually available to act as personal consultants, providing assistance when necessary and sharing excitement when appropriate. They also were ready and willing to provide new learning opportunities, not through expensive toys or specific games, but rather by letting the children help bake cookies or accompany them on a trip to the supermarket. Instead of setting aside specific and structured time to "teach" their children, they simply and spontaneously set up interesting environments, allowed their children to indulge their natural curiosity, and then followed whatever leads the children provided.

Social skills. We discovered that bright three-year-olds were relatively common as compared to nice three-year-olds. Many parents, especially first-timers, mistakenly assume that children come already civilized, or at least acquire common courtesies on their own. Even when presented with increasing evidence to the contrary, many parents have trouble cracking down on their children's unacceptable behaviors, understandably but misguided fear that they might lose the love of these precious and wonderful additions to lives. As a result, the "terrible twos" and the unpleasant temper tantrums of the third year of life are all too common.

Temper tantrums during the third year are not inevitable. In homes where children were developing into people who were both bright and a pleasure to live with, we noticed that the parents were not afraid to set realistic but firm boundaries on their children's behavior, and they started doing so before the first birthday. During the first months of life, these parents lavished love and attention upon the children and responded almost unconditionally to their every demand. However, starting at about eight months of age, when the children's demands were no longer a result of need but often reflected the exploration and testing of what they could and could not get away with (especially during the normal period of "negativism" between 15 and 24 months), these parents let the children know in no uncertain terms that infringements on the rights of others would not be tolerated.

We also learned that consistency in setting such limits often was overrated as compared to persistency. Sooner or later, all parents would admonish their children for certain undesirable activities, but the effective parents always followed through. If the admonishments were ignored or the undesirable activities later resumed, they acted swiftly and firmly. Moreover, their disciplinary strategies were appropriate to their children's level of understanding. For instance, rather than saying something like, "If you don't stop pulling on the drapes, we won't take you to Nana's house next Christmas," to an 18-month-old, they quickly removed the child from the scene and physically restrained the child from engaging in the offending behavior.

These few examples represent the sorts of points we stressed and the style of childrearing we encouraged the parents to adopt. Since program participation was voluntary, we could not require them to follow our prescriptions. However, we have found that first-time parents are eager for information and quite willing to ac-

During a home visit, a parent educator shows a mother how to use her two-year-old's impromptu tea party to foster language development and creative play.

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The Results

As the children of the participating families approached their third birthdays, we contracted with Research and Training Associates of Overland Park, Kansas, an independent organization with no prior involvement in the project, to evaluate the program's effectiveness. Their report was published in September 1986.\(^5\) and the results were even better than we had expected.

First, the participating parents highly valued the program. Of the 300+ families, close to 90 percent remained in the program to its conclusion, and only one or two of the dropouts did so for reasons other than the fact that they had moved out of a participating district. Moreover, 99 percent of the families reported satisfaction with the program, and many of their comments to the evaluators were highly complimentary.

More important, a comparison of 75 randomly selected project children with a carefully matched sample of children from nonparticipating school districts whose parents had not received services revealed that we had made a substantial difference on a variety of dimensions. Unfortunately, while the data collected strongly suggested outstanding social development in the project children, since the science of measuring social skills in very young children remains rather crude, solid evidence for improvements in this aspect of development could not be firmly established. However, sophisticated measures of intellectual and linguistic development—the Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children and the Zimmerman Preschool Language Scales—left little doubt of our success in enhancing the educational prospects of the project children.

All children tested, both project and comparison, were first-born children. With respect to intellectual development, the Kaufman measure has four subscales. The comparison children scored 113, 107, 107, and 110 on these subscales—substantially above national averages, which is to be expected in the case of first-born children. The project children scored 117, 117, 117, and 123, respectively. The significance of the differences on the second, third, and fourth subscales was .003, .001, and greater than .001, respectively.

With regard to linguistic development, the Zimmerman measure has three subscales. Once again, the comparison children scored well above national averages—127, 117, and 123, and the project children scored significantly better—140, 130, and 138, respectively. In all cases, significance was beyond the .001 level.

Implications of the Study

In cases where children were suffering from severe pathology, such as Down's Syndrome or deafness, or where the parents had overwhelming problems, such as alcoholism or abject poverty, that overshadowed educational issues, we did not exclude the families from receiving services, but we made it clear that our program could not deal with their extraordinary circumstances. To that extent, we cannot say that this type of program will have a comparable impact on every family with young children.

On the other hand, these evaluation results are probably applicable to the approximately 85 percent of the population without such special needs. We had success with families in which both parents had Ph.D.'s, and with those in which both parents failed to finish high school. Some families had an annual income in excess of $40,000, and others were living below the poverty line. There were black families and white families. Some parents were in their late thirties, others were teenagers, and a number of them were single parents.

We have demonstrated some basic principles that we feel could—and should—revolutionize the traditional approach to education. First, in order to make a significant difference in the academic prospects of young children, you should reach them during the first three years of life, when the foundations for key aspects of development are being laid. Second, if you want to do so inexpensively and efficiently, work through the people who have the greatest influence on their lives during this period—their parents. Finally, most parents, regardless of socioeconomic status, educational level, or cultural background, are eager to receive the information and support they need to be effective in the role as their children's first and most important teachers.


3. The videotape series used in the New Parents as Teachers project is The First Three Years, produced by the Westinghouse Broadcasting Company in 1977, and available through the Center for Parent Education, 55 Chapel St., Newton, MA 02160.

4. The curriculum materials used in the New Parents as Teachers project are produced by the Missouri State Department of Education. They are available through New Parents as Teachers, Attention: Debbie Murphy, Director, Missouri Department of Education, P.O. Box 480, Jefferson City, MO 65102.

5. The final evaluation of the New Parents as Teachers project was prepared by Research and Training Associates of Overland Park, Kansas. Copies are available from the Missouri State Department of Education at the address above.

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