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Engaging Parents: Facilitating Gatherings

Building Community

Parenting programs can be a lifeline for parents and families. Parents with sensitive and attentive caregiving styles tend to have securely attached children (see chapter 7). Similarly, practitioners who are sensitive and attentive to the needs of parents and families tend to have more successful outcomes. Just like their children, parents want to feel heard and valued. Parents are likely to trust practitioners who are empathic listeners more than practitioners who tell caregivers how to parent. What's more, programs focused on parent and family strengths tend to be more effective than programs focused on family deficits.[1]

Since participating in parent education is frequently voluntary, sharing power between parents and practitioners is most effective for achieving learning goals.[2] All parents, whether they attend parenting groups voluntarily or they are court-ordered, need to feel heard, valued, and respected as experts on their own families and children. As practitioners, we can cultivate a curious mindset when interacting with parents and families.

Some parenting programs are designed to be primarily educational. In these settings, practitioners are generally in charge of the content, and there can be an expected power differential between the group leader and the participants. Parents and practitioners are co-creators of learning in parent education programs designed to grow parent agency. These parenting programs often aim to nurture social connection and provide parents opportuni-

ties for skill-building as they process and problem-solve with others as much or more than it is to directly teach specific information. As a parenting practitioner, you can model important mindsets and behavior for parents, which, in turn, helps parents model mindsets and behavior for children. For example, you can model cultural humility by ongoing self-reflection and decreasing power differentials (see chapter 9).

The attunement perspective of family education can be a helpful framework for parenting program development. The attunement perspective focuses "on understanding families' perspectives, situations, and goals and assists them in bringing their situations and their goals into alignment."[3] An underlying assumption of the attunement perspective is that practitioners need to help change society to support families better rather than try to "fix" families to "fit into an existing culture frame."[4] As a practitioner, you can include key features of the attunement approach by lessening the power differential between you and participants, listening to families, valuing the families' point of view, supporting parents to change themselves when change is needed, and helping families notice and close the gap between their reality and their goals.[5] A practical application of the attunement perspective is Reflective Dialogue Parent Education Design (RDPED), an approach to problem-solving that cultivates empathy and helps parents do their own thinking, reflection, and perspective-taking.

Supportive and transformational parent education happens across many contexts. As a parenting practitioner, you may gather parents in large group settings, like parent nights at schools or family events sponsored by community organizations. You may support parents who attend weekly or monthly small group meetings designed as a combination of learning and support. Parent education can also happen in one-on-one conversations such as healthcare visits, counseling sessions, parent coaching, visits with clergy, or court-mandated home visits, to name just a few. Despite these differences, effective parent education has some predictable similarities. Within these various settings, high-quality parent education programs are carefully designed to have a clear purpose, address potential barriers to inclusion, use engaging facilitation strategies, and support parent engagement.

Purpose for Gathering Parents

When planning a new program, consider your motivation. In other words, shift your thinking from what you'll be doing in your program to why you are doing this program. In her book, *The Art of Gathering*, author and master facilitator Priya Parker suggests these questions to clarify your purpose: "Why is this gathering different from all my other gatherings? Why is it different from other people's gatherings? Why is it different from other people's gatherings of the same general type? What is this that other gatherings aren't?"[6]

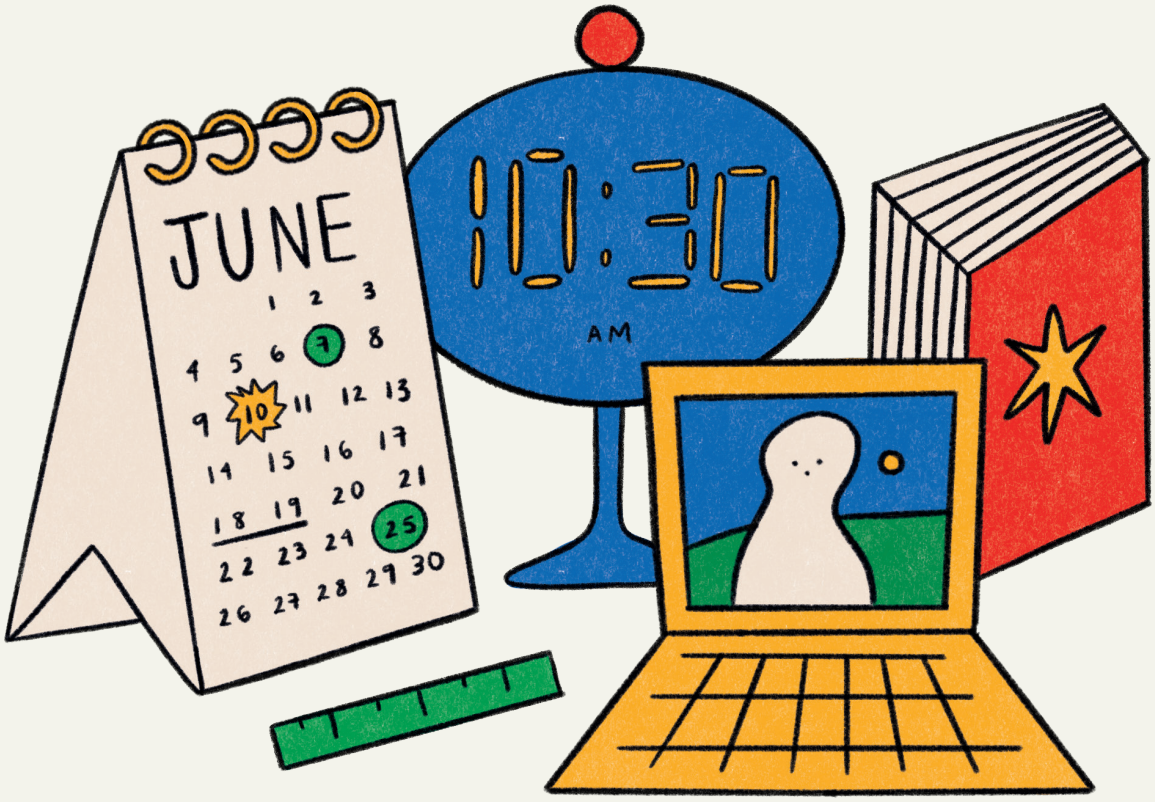
Have families in your setting asked for this program? If not, explore how the community will receive the program before setting it up. Sometimes, social service agencies set up programs that do not actually meet the needs of the communities they serve.[7] Co-creating programs with key members of the community often leads to higher attendance and more success rather than programs that are driven by the point of view of one stakeholder, for example, a funders' perspective. Parker suggests that to help you explore your purpose, "Think of what you want to be different because you gathered, and work backward from that outcome…Knowing what you want to happen can help you make the choices to get there."[8]

Reducing Barriers to Participation

Even when families are enthusiastic about programming, there are many things to consider:

- Meeting frequency
- Number of meetings
- Time of day/day of the week
- Meeting length
- Group size
- Cost
- Transportation
- Traffic and parking
- Food/beverages
- Child involvement/childcare
- Format (for example, online, in-person, hybrid)

Many of these decisions have pros and cons, and there is no one right way to run a parent program. Online programs have gained popularity in recent years. They have the advantage of allowing parents to avoid needing transportation or additional child care for children not involved in the program. Parents can choose to monitor their children while they participate or settle children for a nap or bed and then join the group. Some practitioners run multiple sessions of the same group at different times of the day, allowing parents to join when it is most convenient. This can be helpful for groups that use a specific curriculum with a set number of sessions and specific topics. Flexibility to join different groups can help parents juggle multiple responsibilities, but it may not nurture the possibility of parents forming tight group bonds or fostering ongoing social connections (see chapter 2). Parents may not feel comfortable sharing deeply in a group with constantly changing membership.



"We meet parents where they're at and do it in a nonjudgmental, respectful way. So that whatever vulnerable situation or time of life they may be in, we're not approaching it as if that defines them…We look at them as more than whatever their vulnerability or their need is, and …we recognize that there is always more to us and to really be strength-based."

– Desirée, Director of Early Childhood Parenting Program in Massachusetts

In-person groups can have the advantage of fostering more group cohesion and informal parent and family social connections. Parents can chat as they come and go, share contact information, and arrange playdates for their kids who hit it off or share common interests. Scheduling in-person groups takes careful consideration of busy family schedules. For example, evening meetings may be better for working parents, but these meetings can get in the way of dinner and bedtime. Offering a simple dinner for children as part of the program might alleviate some stress for parents. Stay-at-home parents and parents with non-standard hours or job flexibility may prefer daytime meetings. As a practitioner, it's important to schedule meetings that do not conflict with school pick-up or drop-off times in case families have older children. On the other hand, scheduling a meeting to start shortly after school drop-off can be good timing for some parents.

Very small groups (five or fewer people, for example) have the advantage of giving parents lots of one-on-one attention from the practitioner. Still, it might feel awkward if the parents do not connect or have common experiences. Larger groups often include a wider range of perspectives and experiences, which can give parents more people to connect with and more ideas when problem-solving, but practitioners may need to manage the clock more directly to avoid running out of time for everyone to participate. Many practitioners have a favorite group size, for example, eight to ten parents in a group.

It is important to know your audience and market accordingly. For example, in some areas, families prefer messaging apps to email. Posters can be helpful if parents are already in the building, such as a school, community center, or health care facility. Newsletters from trusted organizations can be a great way to get the word out about a new program, but many families are overwhelmed with email and do not open online newsletters. Word of mouth and one-on-one referrals can be most effective. Simple registration processes and low-cost or free initial programs work well.

Shift your thinking from what you'll be doing in your program to why you are doing this program.

Creating a Warm and Welcoming Environment

Consider your space and how it will make parents and children feel as they enter.

- Bright colors create a fun atmosphere, and pastels or muted tones are more calming.
- Pictures of parents and children having fun together can be welcoming if a wide range of families are represented.
- Fathers and other caregivers should be represented as much as mothers.
- When you walk into the setting, imagine whether parents from various backgrounds will feel that this program celebrates and respects them.
- Avoid harsh fluorescent overhead lights, especially for groups that include sleeping infants. Add floor lamps to warm up the space.
- Many practitioners play music as parents arrive. Consider the desired tone when choosing the music.
- The ritual of getting a cup of coffee or tea can encourage informal chatting, which may help break the ice as people settle into their seats.

"I have some statements of equity that I want them to be considering as they're planning for an event. I have "Who are the people that are benefiting from this event? Who might feel marginalized by this event or may not be able to partake? What are some barriers, and how can we eliminate them? So, pretty simple things. But again, that's been some good role modeling."

– Jenny H., Works with a school parent advisory group, Minnesota

- Try having parents sit in a circle so they can see each other rather than in chairs facing the front of the room.
- If parents sit around a table, name tents can be easier to read than nametags.
- Some practitioners have a quote or a question for parents to consider, write about, or discuss while they wait for the group to start.
- Parents may appreciate an area where they can browse resources and pick up hand-outs to take home. Busy parents may need help keeping track of hand-outs as they juggle children, diaper bags, or backpacks. Having a QR code that parents can scan to access handouts can be helpful for tech-reliant parents.

Opening a Session with Parents

Some groups are formed around a specific curriculum, whereas others use "topic finders" or interest surveys to find out what parents are most excited to discuss. Either way, spending some time helping a group get to know each other will contribute to better connections and conversations across time. Asking parents to introduce themselves can be a good way to start the first session, but be aware of putting parents on the spot by asking them to share information they may not be ready to share with the group. For example, asking parents of newborns to share their birth stories can be isolating for an adoptive, step, or foster parent. Parents may prefer to let their stories unfold over time. Confidentially ask parents about their preferences for the session, ensuring you can read and respond accordingly. Integrate methods to offer parents an automatic out. For instance, provide choices during sessions like, "Share a happy childhood memory or something else you'd like us to know."

Be cautious of language that might indicate you are making assumptions about family structure, whether someone has a partner, or the partner's gender if there is one. Try to be inclusive in the use of language. For example, do not assume that the parent who brings a child to a group is the child's biological parent, but also don't assume that they are not biologically related just because they do not look alike. Depending on the age of the children involved,

asking them to introduce you to the adult they brought with them can be a way to gather information about the language they use to describe their family relationships. Parents can feel unseen or discounted when practitioners make assumptions about their family relationships, and a parent who has a negative experience in the first session may not return.

Create consistent welcoming opening and optimistic closing rituals. Many practitioners open each group session with a consistent activity such as sharing "joys and concerns," "three things I'm grateful for," or "a rose (something good that happened this week), a bud (something I'm looking forward to) and a thorn (something that was not good)." Closing the group with "one thing that you will take with you as you leave" or "one thing that you will try at home this week" can help cement key learnings and take-home messages. Creating a rhythm that is repeated each week helps parents know what to expect and feel more comfortable.

Group Agreements

As parenting practitioners, fostering belonging in groups by creating shared norms and expectations for group interactions is important. Group agreements are also known as participation guidelines, ground rules, community expectations, group contracts, and codes of conduct. Regardless of the title, these agreements aim to set the tone, address interpersonal dynamics, establish shared understandings between group members, and provide the support needed to deepen group engagement. Here are some tips for developing group agreements.

- **Make it a shared activity:** After the group has gotten to know each other, you can invite parents to create group agreements together. If you are pressed for time, you can generate some items for the agreements in advance and then ask the group to add, subtract, and/or reword the items.

- **Be mindful of power dynamics:** If the group perceives that you, the parenting practitioner, have most of the power, they may want to avoid questioning or changing items the leader proposes. Similarly, if there are perceived power differentials between group members, some group members may feel uncomfortable speaking up. You can make it clear that everyone is an equal participant in the process. One strategy for doing this is to ask everyone to write one item for the group agreements on a sticky note and put them up where it

is easy to rearrange the ones that overlap. Online groups can easily do this using readily available collaboration tools.

- **Create shared understanding:** Group agreements need to be sufficiently broad so that they will apply to a wide range of group interactions but not so broad that they are interpreted differently by each person. For example, "everyone participates" is commonly used. What does it mean in the context of your group? Does that mean that everyone must talk? Engagement can look different for different people, and silence can be active listening rather than a sign of disengagement. Taking time to create a shared understanding of the group agreement will make it most useful.

- **Remind the group of the agreements:** The group agreements should be displayed in the meeting space and revisited periodically, for example, when a new member joins or visits the group.If group membership changes every session, it might be necessary to point to the group agreements at the beginning of each session. A low-barrier way of getting everyone to engage at the start of a group meeting is to invite parents to name a part of the agreements they will focus on that day.

New groups tend to be polite and "on their best behavior." As group members get to know each other, they feel more comfortable disagreeing or contradicting each other, which can deepen the discussions.[9] It can be a good idea to revisit the group agreements as group interactions evolve.

Handling Emotions

Parenting is an emotional topic, and practitioners can build up skills to handle emotions in the group. Every parent has their own style and comfort level when it comes to talking about feelings. Some find it easy and natural, while others might feel shy or uncomfortable, especially in groups where big emotions run high. One way to prepare for emotions is to invite them into the room by setting the stage at the beginning of the session. Let people know that the topic might stir up emotional responses and that sharing emotions is welcome.[10] Have boxes of tissue available and point them out to help people feel permission to express sadness or other emotions in the group. Discuss with parents that they might feel angry or hurt watching

a particular video or reading a case study and that there will be time and space to process their feelings so that they know you will be a supportive guide for them to engage with difficult topics. Experiencing deep emotions can help enhance learning, and watching others get emotional about a topic can help parents practice empathy. Practitioners can support empathic listening by naming the emotions in the room (see chapter 3).

Navigating Disagreements

Parenting is deeply personal based on many factors, like individual personalities, experiences in families of origin, culture, religious beliefs, current family structure, family dynamics, and knowledge of child development. What works for one family may not work for every family. Promoting an atmosphere where differences are welcomed and accepted is important.[11] You can nurture less widely held opinions in order to help the group feel comfortable exploring a wide range of ideas and perspectives. Asking, "Does anyone have an alternative point of view?" or "Let's hear from someone who has tried something different" shows that a variety of perspectives are valued. If a small number of people do all of the talking, you can redirect by asking, "Will someone who has not already spoken share an idea or opinion?"

Conflicts will sometimes arise. Sometimes you can simply suggest that group members agree to disagree and move on. This can work well when the topic is outside the scope of the group or goes against the group agreements. However, this approach can leave some parents feeling dissatisfied or shut down. Rather than avoid the conflict, you can shine a light on it. Acknowledging strong feelings, taking time to hear multiple perspectives, and finding areas of agreement can all help diffuse the situation. You can model civil discourse even when you feel worked up or dysregulated yourself. Encouraging parents to pause by saying, "Let's all take a deep breath and take a few moments to reflect before we continue," calms things down and models mindfulness (see chapter 4). Going around the group and asking each person to briefly share a word or phrase that describes how they are feeling in the moment also helps everyone feel heard and supported.

If one person consistently dominates the group discussion or makes inappropriate comments, approach that person individually before or after a session and talk about what is underlying their behavior. For example, you can show curiosity by gently saying, "I've noticed that you seem to be having strong reactions that have made 'sharing the air' with other people in our group out of balance recently. Can you tell me about how you have been feeling in our group

lately?" Some people talk a lot when they feel out of control, are nervous or uncomfortable with long pauses or silence. They may not be aware of how their behavior affects others in the group. New practitioners might feel nervous about starting a tough conversation with parents, but having a caring, understanding talk can make a difference. It lets struggling parents know they're understood and valued and boosts the group's dynamics. Ultimately, it is probably worth the initial discomfort.

Ongoing Facilitation Skills

Great facilitators learn to read the group, which is generally accomplished by listening more than talking.[12] An experienced practitioner intuitively knows when to let a conversation keep going and when to jump in. New practitioners often over-rely on talking and giving information as a way to maintain order in the group. Practitioners are encouraged to become very comfortable waiting for group members to respond without filling the silence with chatter. They also need to feel at ease with their material and have plenty of creative ideas at hand. This will allow them to let the group take the lead and know they can guide things back on track if needed. This is an acquired skill that takes time to develop. Take time for self-reflection, learn from your mistakes, and practice self-compassion (see chapter 5). Remember, even experienced practitioners have off days. Keeping a journal or debriefing with a mentor or colleague can also be helpful.