Parent and Family Education

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This column is devoted to innovative/special techniques and procedures for working with family and parent training. Contributions and questions should be sent to Joyce and Gary McKay, 1800 N. Heatherbrae, Tucson, Arizona 85715.

Hard To Reach Parents

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Typically, parent education programs have been directed toward middle class parents. A variety of programs have been developed whose content and materials have been aimed specifically at this group. The methods and techniques of organizing, structuring and leading parent groups have often been based on working with this segment of our population. The literature in parent education has also shown a tendency to reflect a similar bias toward parents who are both articulate and affluent. In fact, a review of many of the major articles in this field reveals a definite inclination towards parents who are proficient readers; who are capable of thinking abstractly; and who have had sufficient social experience to behave constructively within a group. Research in this field has been similarly narrow in its focus.

The challenge for the parent education movement is to go beyond the safety of highly motivated, easy to reach parents and to become involved with those whose motivation may be less obvious and who may be termed hard to reach. This is not an easy task as parents in this situation often lack emotional support and experience isolation. They may act impulsively, tend to focus on the present, see their lives as a series of crises, and have lowered feelings of self-worth. Their child rearing patterns may be autocratic with an emphasis on maintaining order through harsh and inconsistent discipline.

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Recognizing that these parents have different needs and often have little initial interest in changing their child rearing behavior, has led us to think somewhat differently about parent education programs. The more traditional method of a structured group study and discussion of child rearing practices does not appear to be the most effective approach in working with this population. We felt that this process needed to be approached in a somewhat different manner which acknowledged the numerous psychological and environmental stresses impinging on the family as well as the stresses of child rearing. We have made the assumption that if parents can begin to understand and feel better about themselves, they then will be able to reach out and offer constructive support to peers. It is further assumed that once parents are able to show interest in others, they will be better able to begin to relate to their children in a more positive and supportive way.

It is the intent of this article to focus on one aspect of our experience, group leadership, and to discuss some of the lessons we have learned in leading groups of hard to reach parents.

Group Leadership

The first task is to come to terms with one's attitudes toward dysfunctional parenting and lifestyle behavior. This may include child abuse or neglect, unrealistic and inconsistent expectation on the part of the parents toward their children, extreme poverty, and substance abuse. While frustration, criticism, and blame may be temptation for the leader, they have no therapeutic value. It is more helpful to see the individual parent as a person who, in his/her own early life, was probably abused or neglected or the recipient of destructive parenting practices. In the group context, this is even more important since often parents will expect the kind of rejection and criticism from the group leader that many received from their own parents and teachers. For the group leader to fall unwittingly into his response of criticism and blame not only serves to turn off the already discouraged parent, but also serves to repeat and perpetuate the detrimental cycle of rejection.

It is, therefore, important that the group leader be positive and accepting especially in the early phases of the group when parents may be expecting rejection and testing the limits of the leader. While the beginning stages of the group may be marked with what seem to be genuine questions of interest and concern, these may serve as a test of the leader and the level of acceptance by the participants. While these parents seem to need advice and guidance, to comply by giving answers or evaluating their present behavior only serves to fulfill their expectations that they are again being judged. Moreover, because of the autocratic nature of their own upbringing, this response on the part of the group leader only reinforces this pattern as well as dependence on external authority. It may invite the parents to try to overthrow the power of the group leader or to reject the group entirely.

In an effort to move through these delicate moments in the early phases of a group with hard to reach parents we have found it beneficial to begin with a thorough exploration of the many and diverse issues that confront them in their roles as parents. The group then may choose the order in which they would like these topics to be covered. At this point the leader conveys the expectation that the parents know what is important to them and that they can be responsible for helping to develop the content of the group. Parents often need to begin by discussing such issues as difficulties they are having with their landlord, a boyfriend, or the state protective worker. What is important is that their concerns and needs are being taken seriously. Immediately this begins to break the pattern that one must be strictly obedient to the external demand of the one in authority and disregard one's own thoughts and feelings.

This kind of approach, however, may be somewhat disconcerting to the group leader who finds it much easier to deliver a prepackaged set of ideas to parents. We believe that, while this approach may be useful in other contexts, it is detrimental to the process of engaging hard to reach parents.

Since there are a variety of topics which might be covered, the group leader is constantly challenged to integrate the material that is presented or that arises out of the discussion. Linking one topic to another is critically important both because of the diversity of content as well as the fact that these parents often have a harder time staying on the focused topic.

We find that the leader needs to be more active in orchestrating the discussion. Because many of these parents have had little or no social experience in a group, they are at first anxious and unfamiliar with group rules and later enthralled with the notion that they can command the attention of the other group members. After the group has begun to explore the possibilities of the topics in which the group members are most interested, the leader may want to spend time teaching the parents how to interact in the group. This must be broached without criticism of any individual and strictly for the facilitation of group communication. Listening and encouragement exercises might be used. At the very least, the group leader may have to go over group rules a number of times so that the discussion does not become destructive in its process. Humor and non-judgmental reminders may be helpful. For example, group leaders may need to sit directly next to group members who are having a difficult time restraining their exuberance and physically reach out and touch them in order to help them maintain their self-control.

These dynamics also affect issues of group structure. Because these groups are more process-oriented, they need to be long term. We have found that meeting once a week for a nine-month period to be optimal. An hour and one-half seems to be the maximum length of time for a constructive group meeting. We found that when groups went beyond this time frame it became

counter productive as members had difficulty staying on the topic and group cohesion tended to deteriorate. Because of the needs of the group members and their lack of social experience, the group leader is active in helping to orchestrate, structure and give direction to the discussion. Therefore, it is beneficial that the group be small (6-10) and that it be lead by co-leaders. Co-leadership not only provides communication modeling, but also helps to insure that the group will always meet as planned even if one leader is away or ill.

Written materials pose a special problem. Because many of these parents are either poor readers or cannot read at all, written materials if used as a central focus may cause the group to fail. If written materials are to be used at all, it should be by group decision. When written materials are used, they should be employed to supplement the group discussion and the leader should make a special effort to summarize and explain the content of the material. Optimally, the leader may choose to prepare materials for the specific needs of the group.

Conclusion

This article is a brief overview of some of the issues involved in leading groups of hard to reach parents. It begins to broach some of the difficulties involved but more importantly speaks to opening up new vistas in parent education. Although this is still a developing area, it behooves us to continue to be involved in new and challenging experiences, and to share the resultant insights and knowledge.

Freedom is remembering the weight of your chains, after they've been removed.

—David Allen Coe
