

Parent Education and Family Life Education: A Critical Link in Early Childhood Education Policy

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Two-generation early childhood parent education and Family Life Education programs focused on young children and their parents are a powerful way to address both parents' learning and needs and support for positive child growth and development.

Early childhood parent education and Family Life Education programming should recognize and support fathers as capable parents and partners in diverse family systems.

While early childhood parent education and Family Life Education programming can be offered universally for all families to targeted services for parents and children who are at risk, research supports the merits of universal programming that is free of stigma and promotes positive parenting before problems start.

The quality of parent education and Family Life Education depends on the parent educators and Family Life Educators and the knowledge and competencies they bring to their interactions with the families they serve.

ABSTRACT

Research on parenting has demonstrated that parent-child relationships and the family environment are the foundation of children's future well-being and learning. Research also has pointed to the importance of early experiences in child care and education settings to children's future learning and development. An increasing number of early childhood programs are including parenting education in their programs. This policy brief reviews early childhood education policy, along with research on the role and effectiveness of parent education and Family Life Education. Recommendations emphasize the importance of two-generation early childhood programs focused on both young children and their parents. A continuum-of-services model is presented that acknowledges the diversity of parent education and family needs based on social location.

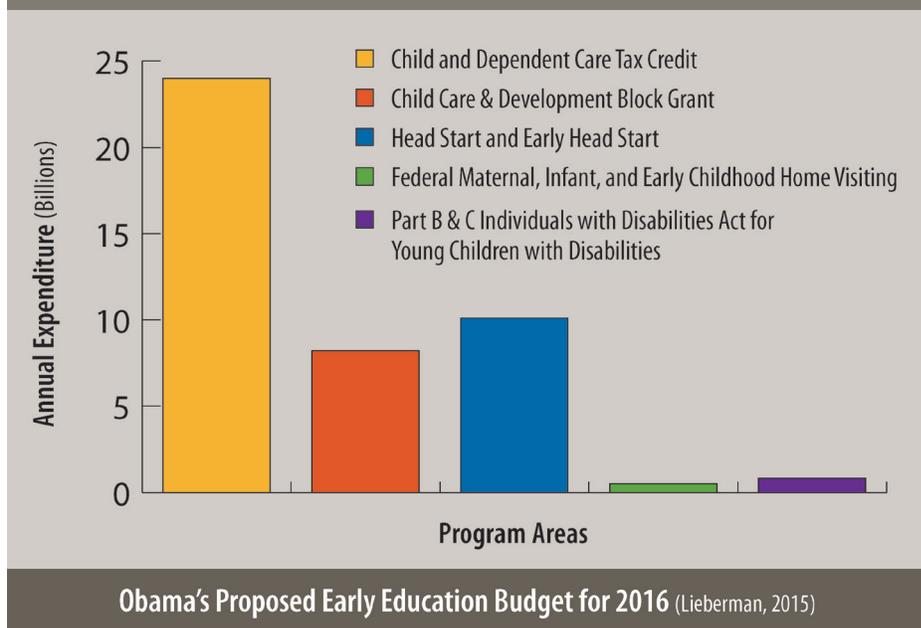
A review of research on early childhood programs over five decades has indicated a declining level of impact on school readiness.¹ Early brain development research has shed light on parent-child relationships and family environments as being critical to child mental health and well-being, as well as school success.^{2,3} However, a review of federal spending on early childhood programs reveals that limited funds have been designated to support parent education and Family Life Education. This lack of funding for parent education and Family Life Education as part of early childhood education discounts the role of parenting practices in early development and school readiness and raises the following question: **What is the role of parent education and Family Life Education in early childhood policy and supporting effective programs and practices?** This brief examines research on parent education and Family Life Education and that education's impact on parenting practices as well as on early development, school readiness, and achievement. Policy recommendations about the implementation of parent education and Family Life Education programs and practices during early childhood are presented.

Importance of Parenting and Parent–Child Relationships to Children’s Development

Research on early brain development points to the importance of experiences in the earliest years of life as critical in shaping a child’s future cognitive, social, and emotional development as well as physical and mental health.⁴ In addition, research on parenting informs us that parents’ sensitive and responsive interactions with their infants and young children play an important role in early brain development and are necessary for secure attachment, which influences healthy development and learning throughout the life span.⁵ Research on attachment over 50 years has built an extensive base of evidence for the importance of early parent–child relationships.⁶ Research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and negative impacts on adult health and mental health reinforce the importance of addressing and preventing these experiences during the early years. Parenting education and support can play an important role in preventing ACEs.⁷ The confluence of research from these areas points to the importance of early development and the central role of parenting behaviors. The early childhood years are a critical time to provide opportunities to have an impact on parent growth and development to support the optimal development of young children.^{4, 8, 9, 10}

Much attention has been given in recent years to closing the achievement gap with young children.¹¹ Positive parenting practices and a safe and stimulating home learning environment are two areas that are strongly related to addressing the achievement gap during the early years.^{5, 12, 13} Research has led to identification of specific parenting practices that are associated with secure attachment, stimulating children’s cognitive

FIGURE 1: PROPOSED FEDERAL EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM FUNDING (2016)



development, and promoting school readiness. They include the following:

- Showing warmth and sensitivity
- Engaging in contingent responsiveness
- Providing parental guidance and discipline
- Providing materials in the home
- Providing for organization of the home environment and predictable routines
- Engaging in shared book reading and talking with children
- Directly teaching skills

These parenting practices reflect the influence of parental nurturance, guidance, and teaching on learning during the early years and can serve as goals for effective parent education and Family Life Education.^{10, 12, 13}

Background on Early Childhood Education Policy

Recent longitudinal cost–benefit studies of early childhood programs and their impacts on adult outcomes make a strong case for increased spending on early childhood programs that focus on children’s learning and school readiness.¹⁴ Figure 1 provides an overview of federal spending on early education proposed by the Obama administration for 2016.¹⁵

There are five different program areas that receive most of the current funding:

- 1 Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit for families with young children to assist with child-care costs (workforce and family financial support)
- 2 Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funding for child care for low-income families (workforce and family financial support)
- 3 Head Start/Early Head Start funding for low-income families (school readiness)
- 4 Federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) grant funding for home visiting (healthy child growth and development)
- 5 Part B & C of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) for young children with disabilities (early intervention services)

The expenditures on these programs reflect the priorities for early childhood funding at the federal level. The largest amount goes to working parents to support the costs of child care through tax credits. Head Start and Child Care and Development Block Grants are designed for low-income families with young children. The Early Childhood Special Education funds are designed for children with disabilities.

Forty-five states are currently funding prekindergarten programs for 4-year-olds and many also subsidize child care and Head Start programs.¹⁶ The federal government has also funded states through a grant program to construct Quality Rating Systems for early childhood programs to improve the quality of care.¹⁰ The spending pattern of federal dollars reflects the emphasis on programs for young children *with limited focus on parenting and Family Life Education*. Only Head Start and Early Head Start programs through the Framework for Parent, Family, and Community Engagement,¹⁷ as well as through home-visiting initiatives, focus on the importance of parents and provide examples of ways to educate and support parents in early education. Head Start and Early Head Start also include parents and families in their performance standards. It is not clear, though, how much of their funding goes toward these efforts or toward the dosage—that is, the intensity and frequency of the activities—of parent education and Family Life Education that is occurring.

Research on Parent Education and Family Life Education Practice

Given the evidence that parenting practices and the family environment have a strong impact on child outcomes, it is imperative to also understand the impact of parent education and Family Life Education on parenting and early childhood outcomes.^{18,19} The practice of parent education and Family Life Education varies across health, education, and child welfare sectors. Research has begun to define components related to effective practice.^{13,19} Parent education and Family Life Education programs include teaching parents about child development and specific parenting skills.^{10,13} Research has identified a number of curriculum and program-delivery components that support desired outcomes for parents and children.^{13,18,20}

Parent education and Family Life Education should include this information to increase program effectiveness.

Timing of parenting programs should be considered in the provision of parent education. Parents are more open to learning and in need of support during the prenatal period,

the transition to parenthood, and the early years.^{4,9} Other transitions such as setting limits for toddlers and preparing children for kindergarten are also important. A recent meta-analysis examined parenting education activities as an added value to early education programs.¹⁸ They identified dosage as a significant factor. Programs that were more frequent and longer in duration had a stronger impact.

The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework stresses the importance of *building a relationship* with parents as the foundation for engaging parents in parent education and Family Life Education.^{17,21} Another key factor is the *readiness* of parents to engage in and benefit from parent

Components of Effective Parent Education and Family Life Education Practice and Programs

- Timing
- Building a Relationship
- Readiness
- Parenting Practices
- Parenting Curricula
- Adapting Programs for Diverse Groups of Parents
- Program Delivery
- Inclusion of Fathers
- Staff
- Scope of Practice

and Family Life Education. Studies suggest that some parents are not benefiting from programs (e.g., teen parents) and that middle-class parents are gaining more benefit than lower-income families.²² This raises a question about targeted versus universal access programs. Many policy recommendations around early childhood education focus on children with the highest need as being the best investment of limited resources. This same principle may not apply with parents. Parents who are struggling with substance abuse, severe mental health issues, or extreme poverty may not be the best candidates for parenting education without concurrently addressing those other issues. Such issues have an impact on family stability and the individual's ability to engage in parenting or other educational programming. Mental health and substance abuse interventions can be effective when paired with parent education and support.¹⁰

The research on *parenting practices*^{10,12,13} creates a clear set of outcomes for parent education and Family Life Education during the early years. These include sensitivity and responsive parenting skills to create a nurturing relationship. Parenting skills around guidance and discipline including communication and behavior management and teaching that includes promoting pro-social, literacy, and preacademic skills are important goals to address in parent education and Family Life Education programs.¹³

A compendium of parent education and Family Life Education programs lists a number of *parenting curricula* documented as effective through randomized controlled trials.²⁰ These programs represent different domains of parenting behavior and theories of change; for example, attachment theory behaviors such as sensitivity and responsiveness; behavior management strategies for children with behavior problems; and programs that focus on teaching early literacy skills. The recent focus on two-generation programs adds another dimension to parent and adult development that builds workforce skills that can increase family income and stability.^{23,24,25}

All of these programs provide a foundation for developing and *adapting programs for diverse groups of parents*. The development of programs and discussion of scaling up evidence-based programs needs to be tempered by the need to adapt program language, activities, and strategies to the needs of specific groups of parents. These needs and values differ for different cultural groups. The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Compendium

of Parenting Interventions²⁰ offers examples of curricula for African American and Native American parents. Some core content may be relevant across different cultural groups but still needs to be “translated” to be relevant to particular groups of parents and families.¹⁰

Research around *program delivery* has identified relevant practice guidelines. Active engagement of parents in learning is critical. Modeling of positive parenting behaviors and dialogue about parent–child interactions on video have also been found to be effective strategies.^{13,26} In addition, opportunities for practice of skills through role play and parent–child interaction time emerged as important factors.¹³ ¹⁸ Research also points to the importance of a clear focus on a specific set of program outcomes versus a more diffuse set of parenting goals or topics.¹⁹

Fathers are often missing partners in supporting a child's development and providing a safe and stable environment.¹⁰ Fathers are critically important given the robust body of research that shows that fathers make a unique and significant contribution to development. Zero to Three⁹ recommends celebrating and harnessing fathers' commitment to being involved. Fathers exist in all kinds of family configurations, and engaging nonresident fathers is important for children. Recent program development around coparenting shows promise for more effective family-centered approaches for working with fathers.^{27,28}

The *staff* person who delivers parent education and Family Life Education is a significant factor in parenting programs.²⁹

³⁰ A review of evidence-based curricula reveals that most recommend the use of experienced mental health, education, or health-care professionals to deliver the programs. A parent and family educator teaching license is required of parenting educators in Minnesota's Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) programs. The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) offers the Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) credential that reflects the educator's knowledge and experience in the 10 Family Life Education content areas, including parent education.³¹ Employment of community members with the same ethnic or racial background as program recipients has also been found to enhance rapport necessary for effective program results.³²

A final question in the discussion of parent education and Family Life Education involves the *scope of practice*. Should parent education and Family Life Education be available for

all parents of young children through universal access or targeted to parents who are most at risk or highest need? A cost–benefit study from Canada provides economic support for universal access, as does research in Minnesota.^{33, 34, 35}

The Minnesota program has demonstrated effectiveness in changing parenting knowledge and promoting positive parenting behaviors across different parent groups. Parents report positive changes in their child’s development in social skills, language skills, and problem solving. An important side effect of universal parent education has been the social support network that parents develop. When parent education

and Family Life Education is offered universally to all parents as an opportunity for adult development, it takes away the stigma that only “bad parents” who are “high risk” need parent education.

Conclusions

Research on universal access to early childhood education, parent education, and Family Life Education suggests that childhood education policy initiatives are most effective when they include a *focus on the whole family* and build the capacity of parents, rather than focusing solely on children’s academic achievement and school readiness.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

The following policy recommendations reflect core principles derived from research and practice that can inform specific federal and state initiatives related to early education and the role of parent education and Family Life Education:

- Integrate parent education and Family Life Education into early childhood education programs for all young children through collaborations across health, education, and social welfare sectors.
- Engage fathers as partners in early childhood parent education and Family Life Education.
- Tailor early childhood parent education and Family Life Education to family, community, and cultural values and needs that consider timing and teach research-based parenting skills.
- Build the capacity of program staff to deliver early childhood parent education and Family Life Education.
- Create new models of research and development to support continuous improvement of early childhood parent education and Family Life Education programs.

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