
Diversity and Choice:

The Strengths of Parent Education in Victoria

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Participation in parent education appears to be becoming more acceptable and legitimate for many Victorian parents over the past decade. The experience of parenting or 'being a parent' has been recognised as potentially confusing and difficult for many adults (Allen and Schultz, 1987: 14). In response to parents' perceived difficulties and expression of need for assistance with the parenting role, professionals who work with children and families have devised a diverse range of approaches to working with parents from informal, often unstructured, individualised, needs-based reading and/or discussion type programs to the more formal and structured approaches which employ the often imported pre-packaged programs with groups of parents in a variety of settings.

Although little systematic information is available concerning the basis and nature of the burgeoning parent education programs currently operating in Victoria, Allen and Schultz (1987) described the current status of parent education in Australia as diverse in theoretical orientations, emphases, topics and settings. However, it appears that many programs currently operating cannot be described as systematic and theoretically based. Fine (1980: 5) defined parent education as "instruction on how to parent" and argued that this definition properly applies to organised, structured programs rather than to more informal discussions.

A number of approaches and strategies can be implemented for enhancing or training in parenting skills. These are usually derived from theories of child development and make assumptions about the nature of children's behaviour, knowledge and motivation. Unfortunately, perhaps due to a limited understanding of the theoretical basis for the application of any specific technique, there is evidence that in some instances the leaders and programs of more informal approaches to parent education may be less effective in enhancing parenting skills. There is some anecdotal evidence that poorly devised, idiosyncratic formulations or combinations of programs can be confusing, misleading and at worst de-skilling for parents. A clear understanding of the principles behind any set or combination of techniques would increase program effectiveness for client groups. An important consideration for service provision in the area of parent education is the range of professionals who devise and conduct such programs. The training of some of the professional groups in this area may not adequately prepare them for the complexities which often arise in discussion groups.

Because approaches to parent education can be categorised according to their basic theoretical derivation, the following analysis of major theoretical frameworks and the programs which are derived from them can offer a useful perspective for reflecting upon current practice in parent education.

1. THE BEHAVIORAL PERSPECTIVE

The behavioral model as applied to the parenting process is based on the assumption that parents should be given the opportunity of assuming an active role in changing their children's behavior. Instead of being passive in the intervention in children's behavior, this perspective implies that parents will actually carry out specific behavioral strategies that are designed to meet pre-established targets or goals. Such parent education programs teach how to apply specific strategies which are designed to modify the frequency, rate, duration or intensity of particular observable behavior. Since the perspective assumed that the overt behavior of an individual can be controlled through the systematic application of learning theory, unacceptable or problem behavior represents incorrect learning. Therefore parents can be instructed in procedures for training children to repeat acceptable, appropriate and developmentally mature behavior and to discontinue unacceptable and inappropriate behaviors. The emphasis is on the use of positive reinforcement for acceptable behavior, extinction or mildly aversive consequence for unacceptable behavior. Combinations of both of the above may be structured in such a way to alter the antecedents and consequences of a particular behavior and therefore modify behavior.

The techniques and their application which are derived from the behavioral perspective, that is, reward and (mild) punishment contingent upon specifically designated behaviors and time-out are easy to learn and apply and therefore are suitable for low functioning parents, as well as generalisable across age groups, types of behavior and settings. Behavior Modification is a well-known approach to parenting based on the behaviorist perspective.

2. THE BEHAVIORAL-COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

A more sophisticated application of the behavioral perspective can be seen in the behavioral-cognitive approach which can be described as bridging the gap between behavioral and humanistic theoretical approaches. This approach to parent education assumes that there is a need to foster the development of the total child by attending to the social emotional and cognitive aspects of children's behavior. The basic goal of parent education programs which flow out of this perspective is to help parents learn how to create learning experiences from day to day interaction through which children can gain knowledge about themselves and can learn how to apply this knowledge in solving problems and coping with situations throughout life. This approach is based on the assumption that the problems parents and children experience are the result of faulty thinking about events rather than the event itself. Parents, and through them

children, are taught how their perceptions of problems, themselves and the world can be changed. When perception is changed, the parent or child tends to feel and behave differently.

The behavioral-cognitive perspective draws on various aspects of learning theory and behaviorism while emphasising the importance of cognitive understanding. Most programs which are based on this theory include, in some form, strategies such as challenge, debate, discussion, drama, modelling and risk-taking in order to develop parents' and children's awareness of self (values, beliefs, strengths and weaknesses), awareness of feelings, awareness of self in relation to others (what behaviors attract or detract in relationships and how effective interaction with others can be enhanced) and problem-solving and decision-making skills (assessing and evaluating alternatives and consequences in a realistic manner). As an individual learns new ways of perceiving himself/herself and the situation, and practices new forms of behavior, change is maintained through reinforcement and reward.

Although behavioral-cognitive approaches have not been used extensively with younger children because of misconceptions about their cognitive capabilities, parents can be taught to use strategies which capitalise on the young child's emerging cognitive capacity. As children learn to restructure their experiences, they gain an intellectual or cognitive understanding of the situation which produces a change in behavior. Concepts may need to be modified and clarified according to the developmental level of the child, presented in concrete form, repeatedly reintroduced and built on to be used as effectively with younger children as with older children and adolescents.

Proponents of the behavioral-cognitive approach to parent education, such as Ellis' Rational-Emotive Therapy and Glasser's Reality Therapy (Parent Involvement Program) argue that parents, through acquiring a working knowledge of how to think and act in a more rational manner will be more effective as they will be able to interact with their children in a more relaxed calm manner, provide mature and emotionally stable parent role models and be better able to help their children resolve their own personal and behavioral problems (Zastrow, 1979).

3. HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Humanistic or 'third force' psychology provided a framework which was a reaction against the reductionist views of behaviorism and psychoanalysis. While the latter was seen as adopting a negative model, with an emphasis on neurotic behavior, the former was accused of reducing individuals to units of observable behavior which ignored the unifying aspects of personality such as feelings, values, choices, creativity and goals.

The emphasis in humanistic models on personal meanings, values, choices, creativity, self-realisation, valuing, dignity, worth and the development of the potential of individuals gave rise to practical applications of these assumptions to human experience. A substantial body of literature has been produced on child rearing practices and on schooling, to support the development of a healthy self-concept. This takes the form of consciousness-raising activities for adults including general guidelines and warnings about raising children as well as specific activities for promoting humanistic goals of development (Thomas, 1985).

The dilemma for responsible adults has been the various interpretations of the humanistic perspective and their resultant management systems. Faith in the child's 'natural inclinations' in the early years of the application of humanistic goals of development recommended a permissive regime, which overlooked the demands of social order. Achieving a balance between preserving a positive self-concept and the requirements for self control in a democratic social system gave rise to parenting programs which attempted to guide families in maintaining a balance between order and freedom.

Humanistic approaches also included the potential for individuals to develop an understanding of human behavior which had previously been the province of highly trained specialists. Understanding self and others is fundamental in humanistic models of management.

Because the development of a positive sense of self is contingent on the quality of social interactions, various models for developing improved relationships in both families and schools have emerged.

- Valuing model — promoting self-worth, self-esteem, self-understanding and self-fulfilment; developed by Rogers.
- Social Discipline Model — emphasising respect for self and others, self-discipline, shared responsibility and co-operation; developed by Adler, Dreikurs, Dinkmeyer & McKay, and Balson.
- The Communication Model — focusing on the creation of humanising emotional climate through effective communication, no-lose conflict resolution and the recognition of problem ownership; developed by Gordon.

The focus of all the above models is on improving relationships. While the intention to facilitate positive interactive systems is evident, the assumption is that adults improve relationships with children by changing their own behavior first. A shift from an authoritarian management system which sought to direct and dominate to one which responded to inappropriate behavior with firmness and kindness was the direct outcome of humanistic theory and assumptions.

4. PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE

The theories of Freud and Erikson have been influential in providing assumptions about how children develop through identifiable psychosocial stages and how adults can assist the development of ego-strength through appropriate practices.

Both Freud and Erikson described the nature of instinctual urges which needed to be satisfied with a minimum of repression. The resolution of conflict between instinctual demands and the environment requires a strong ego, the development of which can be facilitated by effective parenting strategies. There are five principles involved in providing a supportive climate for the developing child.

- Recognising instinctual urges and permitting their expression.
- Understanding the stages of development and the sorts of conflict faced by children at each stage, and assisting their resolution.
- Providing opportunities at each stage for the satisfaction of instinctual drives within an atmosphere of understanding.
- Offering protection and nurturing so that the infant's weak ego is not overcome by the physical environment and social demands.
- Providing increasing amounts of guidance in problem solving so that the ego builds a range of techniques to adjust instinctual demands to environmental and social conditions (Thomas, 1985).

A later development of this theory by Berne, describes personality as being composed of several parts called 'Ego States', which are defined as organised ways of processing information, reacting to the world and defining reality. Three observable ego-states are described as the 'Parent', 'the Adult' and 'the Child' and, while all are present in adulthood, the individual operates in one of the three at any one time. The ego states are not seen as roles but rather emerge in the individual's interactive processes as a play-back system based on real past events, decisions and feelings.

Transactions between the individual and the environment depend on which ego-state is motivating the transactions. When ego-states are complementary, communication and interaction flow smoothly. If transactions become crossed or uncomplementary, conflicts occur and communication stops.

The system of Transactional Analysis developed into parenting systems which encourage parents to consistently develop their own adult state so that children are provided with an appropriate model for developing their own adult ego states. Strategies also encourage children to recognise which ego state they are using in an interaction and the outcomes.

Transactional Analysis adopts a developmental approach, emphasising the various stages of personality development, the ways in which children learn to solve problems and behaviors which block problem solving. TA for Tots and TA for Teens (Freed, 1973; 1976) are examples of parent education programs which have their roots in psychoanalytic theory.

5. ECLECTIC APPROACHES

Many recently devised parenting programs are described as eclectic, and claim to be pooling relevant information from a variety of sources (Lerman, 1984).

Authors invariably state that the program has been devised from personal experience as therapists, counsellors, teachers and leaders which has shown that various client group needs cannot be met by using a single conceptually based system. It is argued that the complexity of backgrounds, values and attitudes which adults bring to their parenting role demands a wider range of options than can be offered by any one theoretical approach, and eclecticism challenges the position that there is one single cure-all method in parent education.

Eclectic programs have been designed by parent educators who have had a breadth of experience with diverse client groups and in most cases, (however not all) on the basis of sound knowledge and training. These programs have been designed to meet parents' needs in culturally and socially appropriate ways, and adopt a non-prescriptive format, offer a range of topics, options and strategies and there-

fore flexibility in ideas and presentation. These broadly-based programs are often used by leaders in a resource mode for group discussion of specific topics.

Well-formulated program packages which are described as eclectic would identify major theoretical sources, and be internally consistent with a stated philosophy of parent-child relationships. Parenting Skills Program and Responsive Parenting are two such programs.

THE STATUS OF PARENT EDUCATION IN VICTORIA

Recent research concerning the status of parent education (funded by Community Services Victoria) has revealed that, in Victoria, the programs most frequently selected by parent educators as a basis for their work with parents and which have had large numbers of parents participating in the program are Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP), Parenting Skills Program, Responsive Parenting and the 3Rs of Effective Parenting. These programs are categorised as being derived from the humanistic perspective (STEP and The 3Rs of Effective Parenting) or eclectic (Parenting Skills Program and Responsive Parenting). These popular programs are also consistent with Fine's criteria for appropriate programs because they are systematic, possess a conceptual or theoretical basis and are intended to impart information, awareness or skills in aspects of parenting to the participants.

Many other programs (too numerous to identify here) are currently operating in Victoria and these have been devised from identified community needs and/or by establishing the group goals of the participants. It is evident that in Victoria parent educators offer a range of programs which reflect the various theoretical approaches and which meet the needs of specific target client groups. Indeed, parent education in Victoria appears to be responsive to and serving community needs by offering diversity and choice for parents!

While it is acknowledged that some providers of parent education require additional training to update and refine their knowledge and skills, parent participation rates in programs generally reflect the continuing need for (if not satisfaction with) assistance with parenting and child rearing. The next step in the development of parent education is the provision for group leadership training which will boost confidence in program delivery by parent educators, make programs more effective and relevant for the participants and decrease the effects of professional isolation and the resulting tendency towards idiosyncratic leadership style.

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