Making Parent Education Relevant to Vulnerable Parents.

Wendy O'Brien

Most packaged parent education programmes available in Victoria teach some underlying principles about children's behaviour and offer specific skills or strategies for managing children. Whilst parent education is seen as an important part of a treatment plan for parents who have abused or neglected their children, these parents are rarely at a stage where they can make use of the information or strategies taught in the packaged programmes. Acutely vulnerable parents, who themselves have been hurt as children, must first heal some of their past before being able to learn and use new approaches to parenting. This paper considers the characteristics of acutely vulnerable parents and proposes some approaches that can be employed to assist these parents reach a point where they can respond to parent education and develop new positive ways relating to their children.

Parent education is defined by Fine (1980) as "a systematic and conceptually based programme intended to impart information, awareness and skills to the participants on aspects of parenting." In 1989 two surveys of parent education programmes were completed in Victoria: Rodd (1989) and John (1989). Both concluded that few programmes existed for parents where children were considered to be at risk of being maltreated.

Parent education appears to be most widely provided for at the pre-school level...then a huge gap appears in terms of any parent education provision for parents with pre-adolescent or adolescent children. The majority of current parent education programmes appear to target more educated parents. Less educated parents appear less likely to seek out parent education and more likely to attach a stigma to parent education. There appears to be limited access to parent education for `at risk', migrant and rural families. There is also a distinct lack of parent education programmes for teenage parents. (John 1989).

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In 1989 Community Services Victoria established its Pilot Parent Education and Skilling Networks Programme (subsequently named the Parent Help Programme), to promote parent education generally and to encourage the involvement of those groups previously missing out, that is `at risk parents', teenage parents, parents of teenagers, and migrant parents.

It appears as if this programme has been successful in stimulating the growth of parent education generally. However preliminary results from an evaluation of the programme undertaken by La Trobe University's Human Resource Centre indicate that parents social isolation has not been significantly changed through their involvement in parent education. Social isolation is a crucial factor in determining whether children are ultimately abused or neglected. Whilst it is possible that the instrument used in the research was not sufficiently sensitive to pick up changes in the parent's social network, it is also possible that overcoming social isolation involves a process that takes much longer than 8–10 weeks, the usual time span for most packaged parent education programmes.

In my experience just getting `at risk' parents to attend a social group is a lengthy process. It involves considerable reaching out to the parents and the establishment of trusting relationships. Basic trust in others is lacking in parents who themselves were abused as

children. Even when these parents do agree to attend a group and actually arrive, they may not be ready to learn new ways of handling their children.

Allan and Schultz (1987) claim that structured parent education programmes have gained in popularity in Victoria over less structured free-flowing discussion groups, but question whether this is because the structured programmes are actually more effective. There has been little formal evaluation of such programmes. Several authors have suggested that these programmes may erode the self-esteem and competency of the parents by inadvertently conveying the message that parents must be taught by `experts' to learn competency in child management. (Fantini and Russo 1980), (Allan and Schultz 1987) and (Schlossman 1978).

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It has also been acknowledged that the packaged parent education programmes only address the parent's conscious understanding and interpretation of their children's behaviour (Harman and Brim 1980).

Parent education is equipped to deal with

the conscious domain and must accept the fact that conscious factors alone provide an incomplete and insufficient explanation of observed parent behaviour...Attitudes and emotions, rather than specific behaviours may have the greater impact on children.(Harman & Brim 1980 pp54–55).

It seems as if the most dangerous and `out of control' attacks of parents against their children are generated from unresolved hurt and anger related to the parent's past experiences of being rejected or abused as children. (Dale et al 1986), (National Committee on Violence 1990). This means it is essential to first work therapeutically with these parents to heal the unresolved hurt and anger so that it does not remain as an ever ready time bomb, waiting to be triggered by the day to day crises that occur in caring for children.

Teaching parents skills, which is what happens in the packaged parent education programmes, on its own, does not prevent child abuse. All of the child management techniques and communication skills acquired will vanish in the critical incident where a child unleashes the hurt from the past in the parent and the parent retaliates. Without forgiveness and letting go of this hurt, the parent is not ready to make use of the skills.

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It has been my experience that the programmes designed for North American middle-class parents, such as STEP (Dinkmeyer and Mckay 1976) and PET (Gordon 1970), are unsuitable for acutely vulnerable parents, largely because these programmes are framed for people who can think conceptually and understand cause and effect. In other words the parents' cognitive functioning has advanced to Piaget's period of formal operations (Flavell 1963). The traumatic experience of child abuse appears to effect children's

perception and cognitive development. It is my contention that unless there is therapeutic work done with these children, their cognitive development does not proceed, so that in adulthood, these people frequently perceive the world differently from others and have great difficulty in grasping concepts or relating to abstractions.

This contention is supported by the experiences of Frank Bishop, a Victorian child psychiatrist who has conducted research into perceptual differences between physically abused and non-abused children. His research showed marked perceptual differences between abused and non-abused children, with the abused children focussing on parts of the picture, so that the significance of the whole picture was either lost or distorted. The parents I have worked with have had great difficulty comprehending the whole nature of a parent-child interaction. From their perspective, it is the child's behaviour which is at fault, and they do not see that their own behaviour is linked with the child's behaviour. Whilst this partial interpretation may be a result of their cognitive functioning, there are also other factors which make it difficult for these parents to acknowledge their part in effecting the child's behaviour.

For these parents, giving birth to their children has frequently been one of their few successful achievements in life; very often they have failed in society's terms; underachieved at school, had an inconsistent work record, relied on government income support, overly used welfare assistance and community services, or alienated and isolated themselves from their neighbours, family and friends. The parents self-esteem is always devastatingly low, but they can proudly claim that they are parents who *love their children*. This makes acknowledging responsibility for harm to their children a very difficult and painful process. It is much easier to blame their children for misbehaviour than to admit further failure on their part.

Yet acknowledging responsibility for inflicting any sort of abuse on children is seen as the starting point for effective treatment with child-abusing families (Dale et al 1986), (Jones et al

1987). When a parent accepts their part in either inflicting or in allowing the abuse or neglect to happen, the parent is then able to protect the child. When their role is not accepted, the parent can rationalize their abusive behaviour and then fail to protect the child. For me, the parent's acceptance that their own behaviour impacts on the child's behaviour is a pre-requisite for parents attending a parent education group. If a parent has not reached this understanding then their involvement in a parent education group can be a waste of time and precious resources.

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The prospect of entering and mixing in any group is awesome to the socially isolated parent who views him/herself as a failure. It is not at all surprising that invitations to attend parenting courses extended to such parents are met with apparent disinterest. The parents perceive that once again, they are being judged as `poor parents'. There is a further fear that their personal inadequacies, or failings as a parent will be exposed publicly in a group setting. Also the notion of attending a course will not appeal to parents who have had bad experiences at school.

A number of workers from the child abuse prevention area have advocated parent education as part of a comprehensive prevention strategy (Garbarino 1986, Cohn 1982, and Wodarski 1981), yet these same workers have questioned the appropriateness of using the packaged programmes available. In *The Psychologically Abused Child*, Garbarino states,

Parenting education groups can provide positive experiences for those who are isolated and who lack the ability to trust others...Groups foster competent parenting by not only providing information, but also by providing emotional support in a non-threatening environment conducive

to growth and change. (Garbarino 1986 p.138).

On page 135 the same author says,
Although packaged programmes may be an efficient, effective way to provide parents with skills and knowledge that hitherto have been lacking, such programmes are not appropriate for all parents. Practictioners must modify and restructure these programmes, or even develop their own programs, to meet the special needs of the parents and families that they are helping.

I believe this is particularly important when the acutely vulnerable parents are targetted.

Many of the packaged programmes offer prescriptive strategies in handling children, and one consequence of this can be that parents take on these strategies literally and rigidly. Carrying out logical or natural consequences can easily become a punitive exercise with disastrous results for both parent and child. I have known a parent to lock a 3 year-old child in his room for several hours because he couldn't share his toys with his sister. The parent believed she was carrying through a logical consequence by removing him to his room, but did not know that 3 year olds rarely share toys well, nor realize the importance of allowing the child to come out of the room when he was ready to rejoin the family.

Lewis (1989) strongly recommends that "In general, parents are the best qualified to decide on how to influence their children." Every child is unique and parents are usually in the best position to decide how to rear their child. Only when children have been abused or neglected, should outsiders be directing parents about their children's care. Then apart from some guidelines about discipline practices, what these parents need to learn is the whole aspect of positive parenting. Many abusive parents have had only minimal experience with giving and receiving affection or encouragement. For parents who have not experienced affection, actually showing affection to their children can be an overwhelming and frightening event. Often there needs to be learnt an entire new repertoire of responses to children, and as these are often totally new to the parent's world, this takes time.

Learning what is normal child behaviour and what to expect at certain stages of development is important, as is acknowledging children's achievements. Having the opportunity to practise these newly learnt responses in a supportive environment is essential if they are to become incorporated in day to day interactions with their children.

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I have outlined my reasons for viewing the packaged parent education programmes as an inappropriate means of achieving positive changes in the way acutely vulnerable parents, (who themselves were abused as children), respond to their children.

To create a programme that works with this group of parents, it is essential to first consider the characteristics of the group and then determine how best to address these.

Characteristics of acutely vulnerable parents.

1. Lack of basic trust.

Parents who were abused as children have learnt that people are untrustworthy. Consequently they isolate themselves from others and do not have strong social networks. They do not reach out for help in times of crises, and this becomes one factor that endangers their children.

One of the key things that must happen in effective treatment programmes with these parents is the learning of trust and the development of a lifeline, ie. the ability to call for help in times of stress or crisis from someone whom they trust. This involves changing the parent's belief system so that "Some

people can be trusted" replaces "No-one can be trusted". Such a major shift does not happen overnight, nor from one seemingly successful meeting with a parent educator.

Unless trust has been established with at least one person from the organisation where the programme is to be held, most vulnerable parents will resist invitations to become involved. Developing a level of trust where the parent is willing to be introduced to a group of strangers is a significant achievement.

Even when trust is tentatively established it is easy for the old fears to re-emerge: "Will the other parents be trustworthy?","How much can I risk sharing in this group?", "Did Debbie miss this session because she doesn't like me?", ... and "They won't miss me if I don't go this week". This means that attendances are likely to be inconsistent until the parent trusts the whole group and feels that she belongs in that group.

2. Negative experiences in traditional learning settings.

Most parents I have encountered in public welfare settings have had negative experiences in schools, frequently opting out of formal education at the earliest opportunity. Some parents can not read, but manage to hide this disability extremely well. They go to great lengths to disguise the fact that they cannot read and certainly don't want this to be exposed in a group. This creates a barrier to parents joining a group, let alone a course of learning. It also means that parents with bad memories of school will avoid joining any sort of course.

3. Cognitively some parents have not reached Piaget's Period of Formal Operations.

Many parents in this group have difficulty conceptualizing and comprehending cause and effect. Abstract discussions prove difficult without a concrete incident that they can relate to in front of them. The packaged parent education programmes assume that parents can conceptualize and that they can grasp cause and effect. The notion of natural or logical consequences is beyond the grasp of many acutely vulnerable parents.

Often the parents have difficulty grasping the total context of a situation; they tend to see parts rather than the whole, probably indicating that they perceive the world quite differently from the workers who are trying to help them.

4. Deprived childhood experiences

None of the parents have experienced unconditional love as children. Generational deficits in parenting have been passed on, so that there is no clear notion of nurturing; no understanding of how love and happiness is generated in a family.

In many of the parents there is the 'hurting child within'- the needy, frightened, but angry child, who has not grown up because there has been no opportunity to grow. In times of stress or threat it is this 'hurting child' that retaliates, not the adult. It is then that the children experience all the rage and frustation or desolation still present within the parent. The children hear the cruel cutting words or feel the sharp retaliatory blows, or experience the emptiness of the unavailable parent.

This is the cycle of child abuse that must be broken!

5. Low Self Esteem

These parents were put down and discouraged as children. Many assumed that they were responsible for the abuse inflicted on themselves. The predominant message they received in growing up was that they were no good, and that is what they have come to believe about themselves.

6. Powerlessness

Most of the parents experience powerlessness, believing that they have little say or control over their lives. In many cases they are on fixed incomes with little opportunity to change their socio-economic situation. Whilst powerlessness is a reality in much of their life situation, the choices that do exist and the options for exercising control, are not obvious to the parents.

When children appear to emphasize entrapment through messy play in a confined space, or the parent's powerlessness by refusing to obey their parents, the children bear the brunt of their parent's anger and frustration.

7. Pessimism

The parents' lives are problem saturated. Optimism for change has long since passed. Consequently advice or suggestions for alternative courses of action are met with despondency...."I've already tried that...it didn't work...I've tried it all and nothing works!"

8. Isolation

Most of the parents don't have supportive family, friends or neighbours. When difficulties occur in their lives they are desperately alone and have no-one to turn to. This becomes a dangerous time for the children.

9. Crises-ridden lifestyles

When parents don't have control of their lives, they are at the mercy of crises. Whilst not all vulnerable parents lead chaotic lives, many do, and where there is no established routine and each day is unpredictable, chaos is the norm.

10. Lack of experience in group situations

Because of their low self esteem and social isolation the parents have usually avoided socializing and joining groups. Consequently they are not at all used to relating in groups. Initially they feel very self conscious and can therefore be withdrawn or distracting. There is little commitment to the group and an expectation that they will not be missed if they don't attend regularly. Listening attentively, not interrupting and taking turns, are new ways of functioning that the parents have to learn. Bringing issues out in the group, and risking, sharing and trusting others are major undertakings. The process of openly resolving conflict in a group is something entirely new for these parents.

Sometimes the parents have difficulty expressing themselves, but usually this changes with increasing confidence. It is more common for the parents to go off on tangents when articulating, and this makes it very hard for others in the group to follow or understand the whole nature of what is being described.

11. Difficulty in implementing techniques described

Counselling these parents about child management techniques on its own rarely results in the parents trying out the newly suggested approaches. The

parents need the opportunity to practise the techniques and realize that they can be effective, before they are prepared to include them on a daily basis with their children.

Addressing the Needs of Acutely Vulnerable Parents in Planning Parent Education

1. Addressing the lack of trust

The successful involvement of acutely vulnerable parents in a parent education programme is going to require a commitment to extensive recruitment. Advertisements and pamphlets will generally be totally ineffective in attracting these parents to a group. A trusting relationship has to be formed and this will usually require several home visits if a trusting relationship has not already been established between the parents and the organisational base for the programme.

It is not appropriate to involve parents whose confidence is so low that they can not converse or risk share to some degree in a parent education group. I also believe that the parents need to be aware of the interactional nature of child-parent behaviour. It is always wise to recruit more parents than the ideal number, eg. attempt to gain a commitment to attend from fourteen parents if you are aiming to run a group with eight regulars. Many last minute crises will inevitably develop to prevent parents who are not quite ready to join, from coming. It can also be expected that a few may drop out during the programme, and it is unlikely that parents will join once the group has commenced.

At the first session it is essential to establish groundrules. Rules about what is to be kept confidential in the group, taking turns, listening to others and not putting members down, need to be determined by the group members themselves. Clear expectations about regular attendance and what is to happen if people can't attend, must be decided. Decisions about smoking and the sharing of food have to be made. Whilst establishing groundrules is important in the beginning stages of most groups, it is imperative with this group of parents because of the trust issue. Vulnerable parents need this

structure to provide a sense of security so that they can risk sharing.

One further issue that must be sorted out with the group at the first session, is how the group leader and other members will handle disclosures about parents hurting or abusing their children. Given the target group of parents, this could happen in the duration of the group.

If a parent misses a group session, the leader needs to follow up to show that she and the other group members are concerned for her well-being. The message that the parent is a valued member who is missed when not present must be communicated. Establishing a climate of trust both in initially engaging vulnerable parents and involving them in a group, and then in facilitating the group, requires a skilled facilitator who is prepared to persevere.

2. Addressing the negative experiences in traditional learning settings

It is important to carefully consider how you will name and describe the parenting programme. Avoid reference to courses or teaching parenting skills as both of these descriptions imply that the parents are inadequate in their current parenting, and parents can easily take offence. Two programmes that have successfully overcome this problem and attracted parents, are *T.A.L.K.* *(Talk and Action for Living with Kids)* at Alys Key Family Care (Rutherford 1987), and *Just for Mums* at Melbourne City Mission Family Centre (Jewell 1991). Both of these names allow for promotion of the groups as an opportunity for sharing with other parents: there is no expert telling the parents how to bring up their children.

As mentioned earlier, not all parents are ready to enter a parenting group. For example, if a mother is particularly lacking in social skills and confidence to the point where she can not converse or share in a group, it is much more appropriate to introduce her to a low-key informal social/activity group initially until her confidence has grown sufficiently to be ready to focus on the more demanding area of parenting.

To ensure that parents do not have their minimal literacy skills exposed in the

programme, make instructions simple and always read out guidelines. Any written materials distributed in the group need to be brief, worded simply and preferably illustrated.

3. Designing programmes that take account of the parent's level of cognitive functioning

Maximum use needs to be made of visuals and re-enactments of specific situations, so that explanations are in a concrete form that makes sense to these parents. The use of Gestalt exercises, such as tableau work and sculpture, allows leaders and participants to dispense with wordy explanations. Setting up a tableau requires only minimal introduction and the essence of the parent's perception is captured in the body stance, the facial expressions, tone of voice and key phrases that emerge in the tableau. Standing outside the tableau enables the parent who created it to see the whole situation, often for the first time. They can be placed in the child's situation and experience what it is like to be on the receiving end of their own behaviour. This experience alone can be sufficient to bring about a change in the parent's behaviour.

They can also experiment with new approaches to see how they might work in the tableau, and they can see how other member's suggestions might work. A whole new range of responses to their children unfolds and the parent
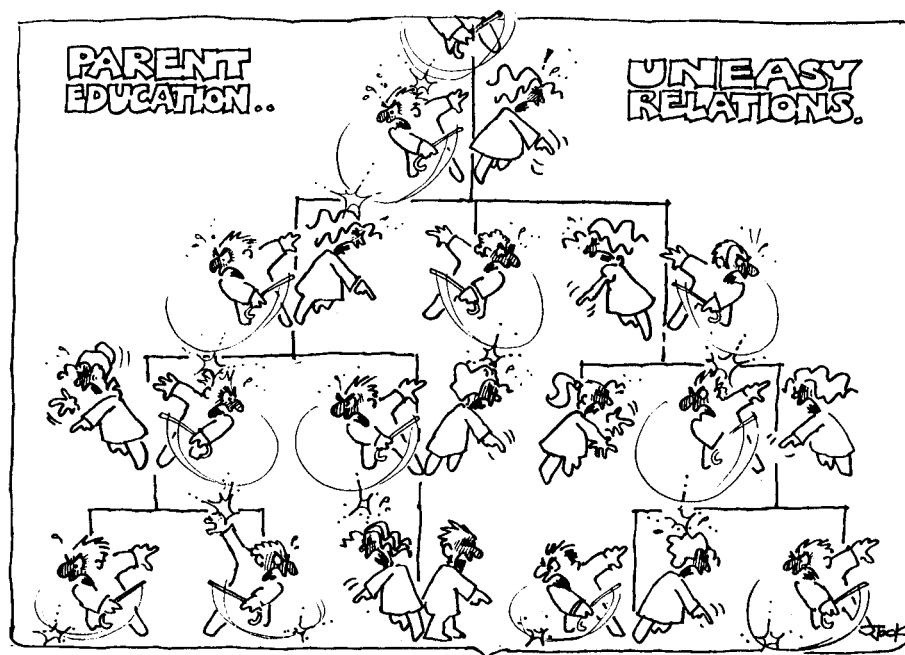
can then choose to use whichever strategy they believe will be most appropriate for themselves. This process then becomes a truly empowering one for the parent. Wherever possible, handouts should be in cartoon format with minimal scripting.

4. Healing the past

Before these parents can move on to incorporating new approaches in parenting their children, they have to release themselves from their past. This process involves getting in touch with their experiences as children, forgiving their parents and whoever else abused them, and letting go of these experiences. It is therefore important to include sessions about family of origin early in the group programme, and for these sessions to be therapeutically oriented rather than following an educational model.

It is easy for parents to get stuck on the family of origin material and to wallow in it. The parents have to be encouraged to focus on what it was that helped them survive; what positives did exist in their childhood and what they want to retain in their own parenting. They need to realize that only by letting go of the negatives can they move on to become the parent they would like to be.
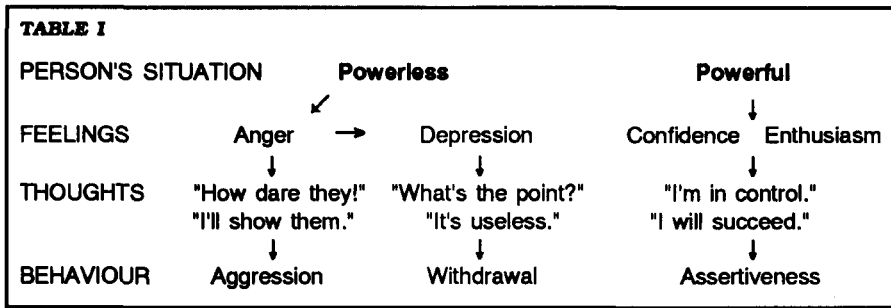
By the end of dealing with the family of origin material, parents should have an image of the sort of parent they

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TABLE I				
PERSON'S SITUATION	**Powerless**		**Powerful**	
FEELINGS	Anger →	Depression	Confidence	Enthusiasm
THOUGHTS	"How dare they!" "I'll show them."	"What's the point?" "It's useless."	"I'm in control."	"I will succeed."
BEHAVIOUR	Aggression	Withdrawal	Assertiveness	

would like to be. Having this image clearly established combines with the parent's desire to create better experiences for their children, to provide a strong motivation for learning new ways of relating to their children.
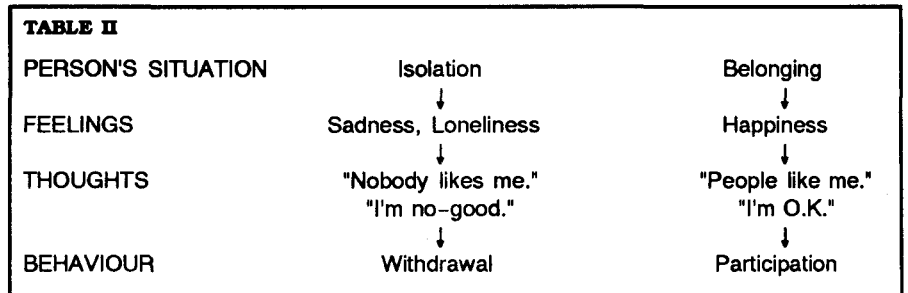
5. Enhancing the parents' self esteem

It is crucial to always value the parents, and to show this at every opportunity – through the recruitment process, their introduction to the group, and in the ongoing group sessions. Simple things, such as referring to parents by their name, welcoming them personally to each session, and asking about the specific issues raised in previous sessions, demonstrate that they are valued. It is essential to never undermine or allow other members to put down a member's contribution. It is also important to include at least one exercise in every session that is designed to enhance participants' self esteem. Unless a parent's self esteem is raised he/she will not be able to effectively take charge of his/her life: a person with low self esteem is not able to be assertive; nor can he/she handle negotiation or conflict resolution well.

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6. Powerlessness

When people are placed in a powerless position they can become angry or depressed. This can result in people behaving in either an aggressive or withdrawn manner. People with power

can choose to be assertive. The process is illustrated in Table I.

TABLE II		
PERSON'S SITUATION	Isolation	Belonging
FEELINGS	Sadness, Loneliness	Happiness
THOUGHTS	"Nobody likes me." "I'm no-good."	"People like me." "I'm O.K."
BEHAVIOUR	Withdrawal	Participation

Providing information, pointing out alternatives and giving choices empowers people. It is essential that leaders do this in running their groups so that these parents experience a sense of power in the group sessions, even if this is not possible in other aspects of their lives.
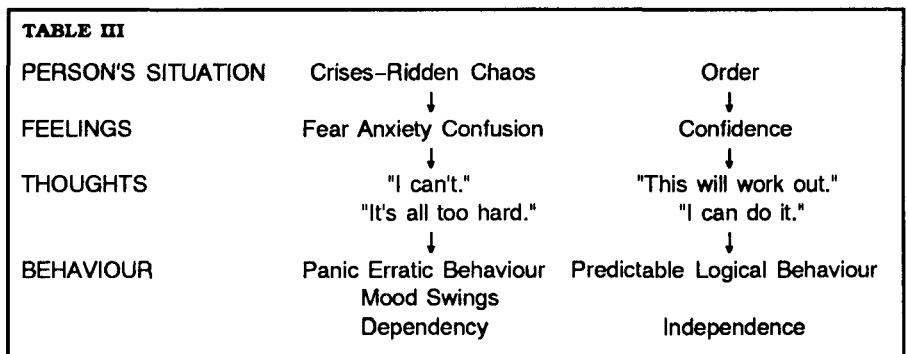
7. Turning around pessimism

Acutely vulnerable parents need much encouragement to try out something new: they need to be inspired and given hope. Initially ask them to try to change something small (and something that is feasible for them to accomplish) and insist that they persevere with it for at least a week. Then review how things are progressing and reinforce their efforts. Encourage them to continue. Point out that change will not happen overnight, but things will gradually alter with consistency and perseverance.

8. Creating a sense of belonging

All human beings need to feel wanted and appreciated: belonging to a social group is a basic human drive. When people have a strong sense of belonging, they feel good about themselves, are more willing to be outgoing and to join in the group's activities. Consequently it is essential that the parents feel that they belong in the parenting programme and that their contribution is valued. The process is illlustrated in Table II.

Many parents believe that they alone are experiencing problems until they come to a group with other parents and realize that other parents are going through similar difficulties. It can be a great relief for parents to realize they are not alone in their difficulties. When parents do reach the point of feeling that they belong in the group and can trust other members, they will begin to make friends and develop their own social network. Then when they do experience problems at home they will have someone else to turn to for help.

9. The importance of order

Chaos in people's lives can lead to irrational unpredictable behaviour and dependency, whereas order creates predictability and enables people to be independent. The process is illustrated in Table III.

TABLE III		
PERSON'S SITUATION	Crises-Ridden Chaos	Order
FEELINGS	Fear Anxiety Confusion	Confidence
THOUGHTS	"I can't." "It's all too hard."	"This will work out." "I can do it."
BEHAVIOUR	Panic Erratic Behaviour Mood Swings Dependency	Predictable Logical Behaviour Independence

This means that it is important for the group sessions to be structured and for the leader to be in control of the group. I have found it useful to have a set format for the group session which I explain to participants at the first session.

Group Format:

♦ Warm Up (a short fun exercise that gets everyone involved and moving).

♦ Unfinished Business (a time for reviewing any homework or addressing group processes).

♦ Main Theme (the main focus of the session, which should take up the largest part of the session).

♦ Closure (a short exercise to bring together the main threads and prepare parents to face their world outside the group).

The Unfinished Business section is very important for vulnerable parents, because they will need a time to unload and deal with particular crises that eventuate. However Unfinished Business should not be allowed to take over and dominate the whole session.

10. Helping participants relate in groups

Groundrules provide a framework for the group sessions and they will need to be reiterated frequently with this group of parents, because of the parents' inexperience in groups. The leader will need to firmly ensure that the groundrules are respected.

11. Putting the techniques learnt into practice

Many parents have difficulty taking away newly learnt approaches in a parenting programme and applying them at home, and acutely vulnerable parents are the same in this regard. Providing opportunities to practise new management techniques through role play and tableau work in the sessions helps. Even better are those programmes that allow a segment of the session to include the children so that particular approaches can be experimented with in that segment.

All human beings need to feel wanted and appreciated: belonging to a social group is a basic human drive. When people have a strong sense of belonging, they feel good about themselves, are more willing to be outgoing and to join in the group's activities.

Conclusion

To make parent education relevant to vulnerable parents, who were themselves abused as children, requires an understanding of how these parents function. Most vulnerable parents are not ready to make use of the packaged parenting programmes that are currently available in Victoria. In this paper I have drawn together some of the steps that I believe are essential to involve vulnerable parents in parent education, and make this experience meaningful for them. ♦

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