

Testimony

The Value of Parenting Education

Shauna Tominey, Ph.D

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Parents matter. Parents have an impact on their children and on our society and that impact is profound.

A tremendous body of research highlights the importance of a child's first five years. From birth to age three, a child's brain produces 700 new neural connections every second. A child's brain is about one quarter the size of an adult's brain at birth, 80% by age 3, and 90% by age 5. With so much happening during a child's first five years, every dollar invested in early childhood counts. High-quality early childhood education from birth-five has been shown to have a 13% return on investment, one of the reasons the state of Oregon has invested in an infrastructure to support early learning.

Although many children attend early childhood education and care settings, 59% of Oregon's 3- and 4-year-old children are not enrolled in preschool. And, children who do attend preschool come to these settings with vastly different experiences and skills. In Oregon, 35% of children ages birth-17 are estimated to have experienced one or two adverse childhood experiences (ACES) with 15% having experienced three or more. The most frequently experienced ACES for Oregon's children include economic hardship (22% of children in Oregon live in poverty with 8% living in extreme poverty), divorce, challenges related to alcoholism, and mental illness.

Even at preschool entry, research has shown significant differences in children's language abilities, self-regulation, and early learning outcomes based in large part on their early home experiences. Research shows that early childhood education programs that actively engage parents through parenting education and specifically those that include opportunities for parents to receive modeling and practice of parenting skills have double the impact on children than those without.

Research has attributed up to 50% of school readiness gaps to differences in parenting. Parenting style accounts for:

- 19% of the gap in mathematics,
- 21% of the gap in literacy, and
- 33% of the gap in language.

Children spend approximately 13% of their waking hours in school between the ages of 0 and 18, leaving 87% of their waking hours in the care of their families. The skills and resources that parents have to provide children with the support they need varies drastically. Our society has made it the norm to take a birthing class of some kind when parents find out they are pregnant. Once a parent brings a child home, however, that support disappears. This is when parenting education becomes vital.

We know that parenting is learned and that it can be practiced and improved. Families are more likely today than in the past to live away from their extended families and families of origin, and thus are missing out on traditional learning opportunities as well as social support. Importantly, social support is one of the strongest predictors of resilience. In addition, research and knowledge of parenting practices that support children's positive outcomes has grown exponentially and it is essential that we share this information with those who need it most: parents. Parenting education is an opportunity to provide families with research- and evidence-based information as well as the social support they need to thrive.

Parenting education refers to programs, support services, and resources for parents and caregivers that are designed to provide them with knowledge, skills, and strategies related to parenting, child development, and positive parent-child relationships.

Parenting education programs have been developed as a way to bring families together in group settings – through series of classes - or to reach out to them through home visit programs.

Research on parenting education has found that participating in parenting education leads to positive increases in:

- Parenting practices
- Health-promoting behaviors
- Children’s cognitive and social development
- Child and parent mental health

As well as decreases in:

- Parenting stress
- Child abuse/neglect

The challenge we face is that parenting education has not been widely available and is highly stigmatized. Historically, parenting education was primarily available for families mandated to participate by the Department of Human Services or the court system and seen as something for “bad” or “inadequate” parents.

The Oregon Parenting Education Collaborative - or “OPEC” - is working to change that.