

Choosing the Right Parenting Program

Did you know that there are over 15,000 parenting programs available in the world today? Some of these programs are research and science-based and have been proven to be very effective. Many more programs have been written out of an individual's experience and personal view of parenting. What's a family minister or parent educator to do? Which program is right for the parents in your church and community?

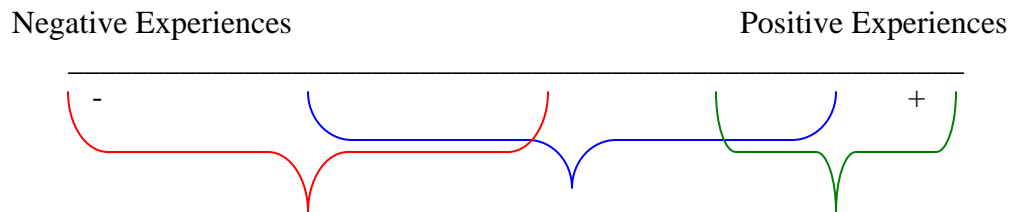
Let's look at parenting in general.

All parenting experiences exist on a continuum. We've all had some degree of positive and some degree of negative experiences regarding parenting. These experiences could have been from how we were parented, as well as how we have observed others being parented.



These experiences don't mean that we will be "good" or "bad" parents. But they do affect parenting decisions that we make and help shape how we relate to others. Where would you place yourself on this continuum?

If we were to group all parents, the continuum might look like the following:



Where do you think most parents want to be located on this continuum? If they were to spend their time and energy taking a parenting program, which way would they want to move on the continuum? Or, would they be moved at all?

If we are going to provide parenting program, it is important for us to choose programs that will truly make a positive difference in the lives of families. Research dictates that 'at-risk' parents require 30-40 contact hours in order to affect lasting change in their parenting behaviors. (<http://www.strengtheningfamilies.org>)

But wait...what does 'at-risk' mean? Am I 'at-risk'? Are you 'at-risk'?

In effect, most of us are actually at-risk....some more so than others. We all have various risk and protective factors that make up our at-risk level and they present themselves in many forms. Risk factors are grouped by community, family, school and individual/peer.

Protective factors are grouped by individual characteristics, bonding / attachment and then lastly healthy beliefs and clear standards.

Within the church community, understood protective factors of God's love, grace and forgiveness are not the only things we need to consider when determining which parenting program would meet the needs of the families we serve. There are other factors with which each individual comes into a program, including various risk factors. Since what goes on in the home is the largest area of risk, these factors need to be addressed. How these factors apply to parenting programs can be found in the research found at www.strengtheningfamilies.org. This site is funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and supported by the Department of Health Promotion and Education. There are many programs listed on this site that have been examined and proven to be effective. Feel free to spend time reviewing this list and the different populations these programs are designed to serve.

Our parenting experiences and how we cope with stress are two huge factors in determining our level of being at-risk. Therefore, based on the continuum above, parents with **mostly positive experiences** would benefit from shorter parenting programs (a 1 - 2 hour workshop and/or 1 – 6 sessions) which focus on parenting tips and maybe some stress management skills.

Parents with **less positive experiences** would benefit from more in depth and longer programs which provide communication skills, stress and anger management, parent support, self-awareness activities, as well as opportunities to practice and report the progress on the parenting skills presented in the program. Short-term interventions with high-risk families are viewed as merely a band-aid for a family who is struggling. Short-term efforts do not result in long-term solutions for change within at-risk or high-risk families. Unfortunately, recruitment for long term programs can be very difficult; however, once at-risk families are involved in a program that is meeting their needs appropriately, they often don't want the program to come to a close.

Parents with **more negative experiences** might benefit from counseling, and then support groups along with in-depth parenting programs, which might include home visits by para-professionals or skilled volunteers for on-going support and accountability. However, there are some parents who will never be candidates for parenting programs. These parents are usually involved with Child Protective Services and have been determined by the courts to be unfit as parents. In reality, we may love God dearly and still be an ineffective or possibly abusive parent.

The subject of inappropriate parenting practices is not always a popular topic of discussion within the church; however, the reality is 80% of individuals who abuse children report being involved within the religious community. This statistic alone indicates there is a need for effective parenting programs. These programs should help us to realize that the parenting experiences we have had from God, as well as the parenting experiences we have had from others are very important to our parenting decisions and practices.

Whether we consider parenting important or not, the continuum of parenting exists. The grouping of families indicated above is not out of line. The effects of our experiences are real. If we offer a parenting program at our church and the community is our focus, we won't know "who's" walking in our door and we will have the whole spectrum of the experiences and needs represented on the continuum.

Churches all too often choose popular parenting programs without truly looking at the many and diverse needs and risks within their community and congregation. If a parenting program espouses God within the curriculum, it may or may not address the needs of the program participants. In any case, if the church is truly a place for sinners, then we need to remember that sinners are coming to our parenting programs and their "sins" may be entwined in their parenting practices. And, as leaders, we need to at least be aware of what these "sins" may be and how to address them when they are encountered, as well as what risk that it places for the family.

So which parenting program should you choose to make available in your church? Which program would allow the community to view your church as "the place to come" and learn how to be a Godly parent / or just a really good parent? It's a tough decision but one that God will honor and support. He wants to be the center of the family and for that family to be functioning effectively – loving Him and loving others.

Now, identify your target audience, their level of need and their risk level. Teach to the deficits of parents, including known risk factors, all the while strengthening their relationship with God and within their family. I'll be praying for God to bless you and the families you serve!

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