

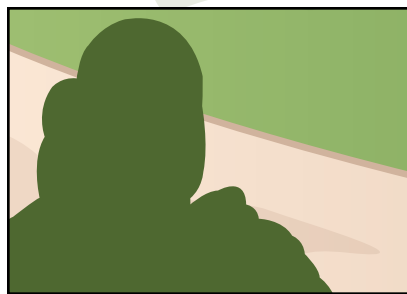
Instilling hope

PILOT PROGRAM EMPOWERS PARENTS TO LEARN FROM EACH OTHER



— An essay by Kevin Wright

Parent training programs across the nation, crafted via a “top-down” strategy that makes experts responsible for the conceptualization, design and implementation of the program, seem to view parents as the problem or obstacle to the healthy development of the child.



Project HOPE (Helping Our Parents be Educators), a federally funded, five-year project partnering Binghamton University's College of Community and Public Affairs and the Youth Services unit of Lourdes Hospital in Binghamton, takes a starkly different approach to parenting education and family strengthening.

There is no argument about these facts: For children to be successful and healthy and to abstain from behaviors that place them at risk, parents need to be active in the socialization of their children. They need to communicate with and educate their children about risky behaviors. They must accept responsibility for being the primary educators of their children. They must share, model and educate their children in the values they hold. They must be accountable to themselves as parents.

PROJECT HOPE AFFORDS A UNIQUE “PARENT- DESIGNED” AND “PARENT-DRIVEN” APPROACH TO STRENGTHENING FAMILIES AND PREVENTING PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIOR OF YOUTH.

But programs designed to prevent problematic behavior among youth by attempting to increase parental capacity through skill development might well be undermining the very process they are designed to enhance.

Over the years, what parents have consistently expressed to me and my Lourdes collaborators is something more poignant and more basic than a lack of parenting skills. What we hear is that many individuals feel wholly inadequate to assume the role of parent. They often struggle to accept that they have the authority and question whether they can live up to the responsibility of parenting. They fear that they may not be able to help, support and guide their children, not because they lack the skills, but because they fear they lack the wherewithal.

Parent training programs have traditionally relied on curricula written by experts in child development and family functioning, an approach that automatically places parents in an inferior role within the service provider/

parent relationship. We suspect this reinforces rather than productively addresses parental doubts and feelings of inadequacy. While designed to enhance parent/child relationships, support effective monitoring, encourage less family conflict and promote effective communication of parental expectations and prosocial values, the clearest message such programs might be sending to parents is that the service provider, not the parent, is the repository of the necessary skills, knowledge and commitment to really help children.

In designing Project HOPE, my colleagues at Lourdes Hospital and I decided to build upon some shared core beliefs. We believe, for instance, that even individuals who are struggling in life have the capacity to effect positive change in their own lives and in the lives of their children.

We believe that as they experience the possibility of effecting change in their own lives, parents will become more empowered to parent, that parents are most likely to engage in the change process when they have ownership of it and that feeling efficacious as a result of one's own performance in an endeavor will likely elicit more frequent practice of that particular behavior.

Who better, then, to instill these beliefs and to encourage good parental practice than parents involved daily in these very struggles and experiences?

From its inception, Project HOPE brought together a diverse group of parents from disparate racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. These parents then worked for a year to develop a parenting program. Later, they became the recruiters of new parents as well as the facilitators for the training program they designed.

Now starting its fourth year, Project HOPE affords a unique “parent-designed” and “parent-driven” approach to strengthening families and preventing problematic behavior of youth, including teenage pregnancy, school misbehavior, failure and truancy, delinquency, substance abuse and suicide.

The majority of the original parents who developed the program remain involved with it today. Why? They feel more knowledgeable about parenting and about themselves; they feel that they have created and are part of a community of parents; and, most importantly, they express a sense of accomplishment. They are making a difference in others' lives.

The program that the parents developed lasts 11 weeks. It involves a weekly three-hour meeting that includes a family dinner along with the training session. Seven groups have been recruited and have gone through the training, with 47 individuals graduating.

What do participants say about their experience? They say they have learned that they are not alone in facing the challenges of parenting; other parents have the same problems and feelings. They learn that the problems of parenting cross all lines — ethnic, educational and economic. They report that they learn



from other parents and that by the end of the program, they stop and think before reacting to their child. Communication with their child improves. They report being more patient and feeling less guilty. They indicate that they are taking more active roles in monitoring and disciplining their children. They learn that it's OK to hold their children accountable and to be stricter and more consistent.

"That wouldn't work with our parents!" one of the Project HOPE parent facilitators, Tim Johns, was told when he spoke about our program at a national conference of family service providers.

Frankly, I'd bet that it would.

Parents who because of their own struggles or those of their children have been involved in social services or the mental-health system often report feeling that they've "been through the mill." They have been told what to do and have been made to jump through hoops. Their mistakes, they have been told, would need to be corrected by the experts and agency personnel. As parents, they have been left feeling alienated and disempowered to change their lives and the lives of their own children.

Project HOPE works differently. It is rooted in the belief that learning more about the day-to-day struggles that other parents experience heightens the likelihood of parental efficacy. People as a rule are significantly influenced by the feedback of others, particularly those with whom they share common bonds and experiences. Project HOPE participants tell us that for those in the throes of raising children and youth, suggestions and help from another parent help to legitimize the process and to empower them as individuals and as agents of change in their families.

For most, the project name HOPE is no longer an acronym, but a new reality in their lives. ■



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