



Do We Know What Good Parenting Is? And Can Public Policy Promote It?

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Parenting matters. Children who experience secure attachment relationships and authoritative parenting are less resistant with parents as two-year-olds, more cooperative with peers as preschoolers, and get better grades and get drunk less as teenagers. Three programs are described that have proven effective in promoting competent parenting: parent education newsletters, home visiting, and parent training for aggressive youth. The chapter concludes that raising children is clearly the parent's responsibility, yet it may be the policymaker's responsibility to help create the conditions under which parents can do their best. Several specific government policies and personal actions are identified that can promote competent parenting.

Political interest in children and families ebbs and flows but now may be at its highest peak in the last 20 years among policymakers, professionals, and the public alike (Hutchins, 1998; Ooms, 1995). When the American public is asked what is most important, families top the list (Legato, 1999). When policymakers are asked, leaders of state legislatures across the country call child and family issues a “sure-fire vote winner” (State Legislative Leaders Foundation, 1995). Similarly, in our polling of the Wisconsin state legislators who advise us on topics for Family Impact Seminars, competent parenting tops the list. The concern for families is not Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, but is so universal that it is simply American (Jacobs & Davies, 1991).

Yet, in recent national surveys, the leaders of state legislatures report being generally unaware of grassroots groups that advocate on behalf of children and families, unacquainted with child and family advocates, and seldom contacted by constituents on family issues. Also, they feel unfamiliar with how children and families are faring in their districts and uninformed about effective family policies and programs (State Legislative Leaders Foundation, 1995; Zigler, 1998).

Before suggesting policy ideas, this chapter responds to five related questions that policymakers might ask when considering whether legislation can promote competent parenting: (1) Does parenting matter? (2) Do we know what competent parenting is? (3) Can we mount effective programs to improve parenting? (4) Is parenting a proper issue for public policy or is it strictly a personal matter? (5) What policy options and personal actions can promote good parenting? To answer these questions, we draw upon hundreds of studies of parenting conducted in the last couple decades—not to offer a specific policy solution—but to provide a solid foundation for thinking about a range of policy options concerning parents.

Does Parenting Matter?

Almost every year, best-selling books gain momentary fame with proclamations that parents matter little to children's development, usually suggesting that children grow according to a fixed genetic script, or sometimes that peers and other influences matter more. Some books even argue that children have a bigger impact on parents than parents have on kids (a view we can sympathize with when our toddler is crying at midnight or our teenager is rebelling).

Researchers familiar with the hundreds of studies on parenting are virtually unanimous in agreeing that genes and social influences, in addition to parents, are crucial to understanding why children grow into one kind of person or another. But these same scholars quickly add that child rearing by the family is still the first and foremost influence on most child development outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Sawhill, 1992; Steinberg, 1996; Zigler & Gilman, 1990).

The best evidence for the importance of parenting comes from two kinds of studies. The first is of children who are deprived of any or most parental influence, typically children raised in orphanages. The recent case of Rumanian children who spent many years in orphanages with no parent-like figure, for example, re-confirms what earlier studies have shown: most children in such situations sustain lifelong effects and many never leave institutionalized care. Parents matter.

The second form of data comes from experiments where parents are trained to change their child rearing behaviors, and the effects on children's development can be charted. Experiments of this sort solidly prove a cause-and-effect relationship, with changes in parenting behaviors having the power to raise children's intelligence or reduce their juvenile delinquency, for example.

In the apt words of Urie Bronfenbrenner, the family is the "most powerful, the most humane, and by far the most economical system known for building competence and character" (1986, p. 4) in children and adults alike. As the only institution based primarily on love and caring, families teach connectedness and a commitment so strong that we would give our life for each other (Hewlett & West, 1998). More than any other institution, families perform the magic feat of "making and keeping human beings human" (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, p. 3).

Do We Know What Competent Parenting Is?

Parenting is such a personal matter, and children are all so different from each other, that we might wonder if there can be any agreement on what "competent parenting" is. To a surprising extent, researchers can agree (Maccoby and Martin, 1983). The greatest consensus surrounds the infancy period, when the characteristics of competent parenting are most strongly influenced by biology and least affected by culture.

By just examining U.S. culture in this era, researchers can give a surprisingly coherent picture of competent parenting across the years of childhood. The picture will have some variations depending upon the gender of the child and the ethnic subculture, social class, and family structure. The picture is complex, and researchers are quick to admit that their knowledge is incomplete. But it is fair to summarize that, to a surprisingly great extent, researchers can observe normal interactions of parents with their children at home, and from these observations can predict quite a bit about children's later compliance with adults, cooperativeness with peers, empathy with the distress of others, school failure or success, aggressiveness across their childhood years and into adulthood, and many other outcomes.

Much of the complex picture of parenting that is painted by research findings can be summarized in terms of (1) parent-child attachment in infancy, and (2) authoritative parenting in childhood and adolescence. A secure attachment bond in infancy is the result of parenting that is sensitively responsive and reliably available to the infant. Beginning in the preschool years, authoritative parenting combines high demandingness (high expectations for the child, a willingness by the parent to exert authority, set rules, and act consistently), and high responsiveness (expressing warmth to the child, listening to the child's point of view, engaging in verbal give-and-take with the child, and explaining the reasons for the parent's rules).

Hundreds of research studies document that children who experience secure attachment relationships and authoritative parenting are much more likely than other children to "do better" in almost any measurable way. They are less resistant with their parents as 2-year olds; more cooperative with peers as preschoolers; and get better grades and get drunk less as teenagers (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Even with this general conclusion we must note cultural differences. Among some groups, notably Asian-Americans and African-Americans, high demandingness alone leads to better outcomes regardless of the amount of responsiveness.

Can We Mount Effective Programs to Improve Parenting?

The short answer is “yes.” This may surprise many parents who believe that effective child rearing is:

...either common sense (Everybody knows what good parents do, just ask my grandmother), instinctive (Some people are naturally good parents; either you are or you aren't and it can't be taught) or relative (Who's to say what a good parent is, anyway? Steinberg, 1996, p. 104).

But studies of actual parenting education and support programs verify that the specific knowledge and skills of effective parenting can be promoted in parents, ultimately benefitting children's development. Effective programs are of many types, and one convenient way to categorize them is in terms of the level of needs of the parents they target. At one extreme we have primary prevention programs, which are provided to every family in a community. Secondary prevention programs are provided to only those families who are “at risk” of parenting difficulties. And tertiary prevention programs are really “treatment” programs for families that have shown serious difficulties, such as child abuse. They are “prevention” programs in the sense that, if successful, they prevent a re-occurrence of the problem. See figure 1 (first suggested to us by David Andrews of Ohio State University).

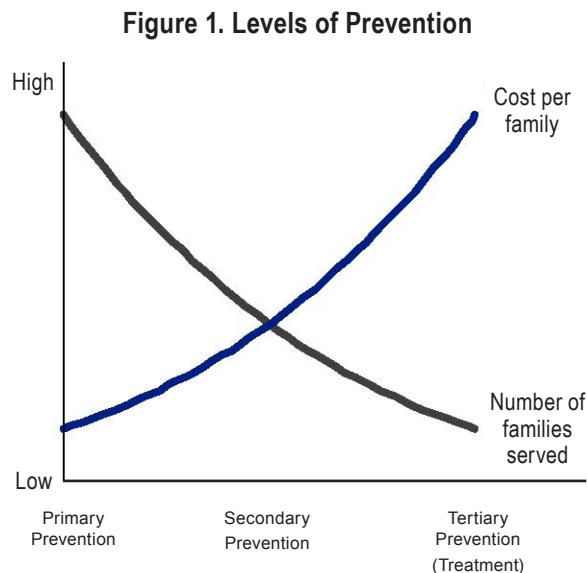


Figure 1 shows how these three levels of programs differ in the number of families they reach and the costs per family. Primary prevention programs, because they reach everyone, must be inexpensive on a per-unit basis. In the next section, we describe a successful example of this type of program, which provides instruction to parents through newsletters that cost less than \$10 per family per year. As an example of an effective secondary prevention program, we will describe intensive home visiting programs. They cost around \$3,000 per family per year, but they can prevent child abuse in a smaller number of families where this would otherwise be highly likely. Child abuse, of course, ends up costing society a great deal, so these programs can be very cost effective, despite their high per-unit cost. An example of an effective tertiary prevention (or treatment) program is a well-evaluated parent training program that creates real change for families whose children are already aggressive or in trouble with the law. To be effective with these families, the program must include intensive work that is fairly expensive, but of course not nearly so expensive as the future incarceration of these children in prisons.

If effective programs are available at all three prevention levels, in which level should public policy invest its funds? We believe that a balance of programs at all three levels is best. Following are descriptions of these three programs, one at each level and all proven to be effective.

Aged-Paced Parent Education Newsletters

Because families find parenting information most useful when it is provided at needed times—not too early or too late--newsletters geared to the age of the child are one vehicle for teaching competent parenting. Every year, over half of Wisconsin families with newborns receive the 12 monthly age-paced “Parenting the First Year” newsletters produced by UW-Extension. “Age-paced” means parents learn about 5-month-olds when their baby is exactly that age. Newsletters are inexpensive, compared with home visits or parent education classes, which may make them one of the “few economically feasible methods of primary prevention in the area of child rearing” (Riley et al., 1991, p. 252). Primary prevention requires, by definition, providing education to parents before problems arise, in effect delivering the program to all families.

In a study of Wisconsin’s “Parenting the First Year” newsletter, Milwaukee parents reported they found its information and advice to be “highly useful” significantly more often than any other source, including physicians and one’s own relatives (Riley, Meinhardt, Nelson, Salisbury, & Winnett, 1991). In another study of their effectiveness, a field study was conducted with 1,104 Milwaukee families who had a 14-month old child (Riley, 1997). Parents who received the newsletters, compared with those who did not, had attitudes that were significantly less like child-abusing parents. Consistent with this belief, they also reported spanking or slapping their baby fewer times in the previous week.

Building on these results, Bogenschneider and Stone (1997) developed a series of three newsletters for parents of high school students, predicting that adolescence, like infancy, may be a sensitive period when parenting practices are in flux and parents are more receptive to advice. Comparing newsletter readers to a no-newsletter control group in a study of 726 Wisconsin parents, those who read all of the newsletters monitored their teenagers’ activities more closely, were more responsive and available to their children, and engaged in more discussions of risky teen behaviors with their adolescent. Importantly, monitoring and responsiveness are key features of authoritative parenting, the highly-effective parenting style mentioned earlier. When the newsletters included the perceptions of local parents and teens from community surveys, an additional benefit emerged. For every 1,000 newsletters mailed at a cost of about \$5 per family, an estimated six episodes of teen drinking and driving were prevented.

An especially positive note in these studies is that the newsletters have proven as effective (and oftentimes more effective) for parents who need them most—parents in disadvantaged and highly stressed environments. In studies of the first-year newsletters, those who benefitted most were parents at greatest risk for parenting difficulties—single parents, first-time parents, and parents who were less educated, lower income, and more socially isolated (Riley, et al., 1991). Similarly, in studies of parents of adolescents, newsletters proved more advantageous to parents who faced more of the risks that may interfere with good parenting—a high school education or less, a family structure other than a two-parent biological or adoptive family, limited contact with relatives, and social isolation from friends (Bogenschneider & Stone, 1997).

In terms of state policy, development of the “Parenting the First Year” newsletter series was partly funded by the Wisconsin Children’s Trust Fund, a state agency. Writing of the sequel series, “Parenting the Second and Third Year” was also made possible by state funding, with a Maternal & Child Health grant. The \$250,000 cost of distributing these newsletters through the mail to about 45,000 Wisconsin households each year is underwritten by a network of local partnerships including 77 maternity hospitals, 22 health departments, 165 Kiwanis Clubs, 70 county Extension offices, and private funding from the Child Abuse Prevention Fund of Milwaukee. This contrasts with some other states, which distribute our Wisconsin parenting newsletter entirely with state funding.

Intensive Home Visiting

Home visiting has emerged in the last two decades as a promising strategy for promoting competent parenting. Home visiting is a generic term that encompasses a number of interventions (e.g., home visits alone and

visits supplemented with case management or child care) by a range of program staff (from nurses to para-professionals and volunteers) with a variety of goals (e.g., preventing child abuse, helping families become economically self-sufficient) for diverse families (e.g., families in high risk environments or any family with a newborn in a particular geographic locale).

The common element in these programs is a series of regular visits to the home of a young child (often weekly or bi-weekly for the first year) with the goal of enhancing the child's well-being by changing the parent's behavior through parent education, social support, and practical assistance (Gomby, Culross, & Behrman, 1999). Home visiting is based on the rationale that parents who have realistic expectations of a child, know ways to respond to misbehavior, have friends and relatives they can count on, and possess the resources for coping with stressful life events will be responsive to their child in ways that are more apt to build strong attachments and prevent abuse.

Evaluations of intensive home visiting programs show a mixed picture, with some rigorous studies showing very positive impacts, while other studies do not (Gomby, et al., 1999). When benefits have been documented, the effects have not always been large, and programs have benefitted some types of families more than others. Taken together, the evidence suggests that these programs have great potential, but not every home visiting program is living up to that potential.

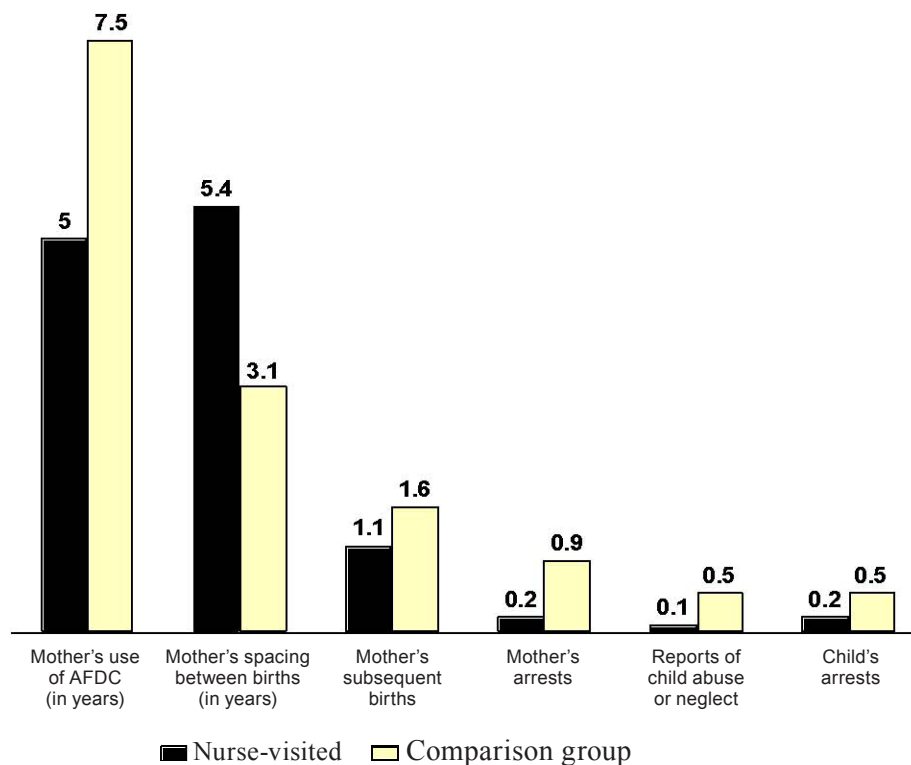
The most promising results have been documented by the only home visiting program that has follow-up data. Olds has conducted a 15-year longitudinal study using a rigorous experimental design that compares the treatment with a comparison group (Olds, 1997). In Old's program, nurses visited low-income mothers, many of whom were unmarried teens. The voluntary visits occurred in their homes prenatally and during the first two years of the children's lives.

Compared with low-income families assigned to an alternate program (transportation and developmental screening only), nurse home visiting resulted in benefits to children's behavior and the mother's life course, and lower child abuse rates when measured 15 years later. Using data from the Elmira (New York) study of primarily white families, the 15-year-olds born to low-income, nurse-visited mothers had 90 percent fewer verified reports of child abuse and neglect and also 50 percent fewer arrests. Compared with the control group, mothers visited by nurses in the study had (on average):

- Thirty fewer months on AFDC;
- Thirty-six fewer months on Food Stamps and Medicaid;
- One-third fewer subsequent births;
- A spacing of 30 months more between first and second children; and
- Seventy percent fewer arrests as shown in Figure 2 (Olds, 1997).

In a follow-up study in Memphis of low-income urban African-American families, the two-year assessments replicated some of these improvements in parental caregiving and maternal life course, although the long-term Elmira evaluation documented more substantial gains on a broader range of outcomes (Olds et al., 1999).

Figure 2. Old's Nurse Home-Visiting Study: Age 15 Findings



Note: From "Improving the Economic and Social Well-Being of Families with Home Visitation Early in the Life Cycle" (pp. 33-36), by D. L. Olds, in K. Bogenschneider, T. Corbett, M.E. Bell, & K.D. Linney (Eds.), *Moving Families Out of Poverty: Employment, Tax, and Investment Strategies*, 1997, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin.

State and local governments are financing home visiting through existing programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, child abuse funds, and crime prevention dollars. For disadvantaged mothers in Olds' study, home visiting programs paid for themselves by the time the child was age 4 in reduced government expenditures, primarily for AFDC and Food Stamps.

Because the umbrella of home visiting covers diverse programs with different goals, the varying impact that appears to exist among programs is not surprising. "Home visiting programs do not have the same ingredients and they will not produce the same effects" according to Gomby and colleagues (1999, p.20), leading to contradictory conclusions. For home visiting, as for many other programs, policymakers need more fine-tuned evaluations that demonstrate not only whether the program works, but also what outcomes are affected, why and how effects occur, for which families, and under what conditions (Cohen & Ooms, 1993; Weiss, 1986).

Parent Training

The efficacy of parent training can be discussed using the example of juvenile crime. In longitudinal studies, the strongest predictor of juvenile delinquency is ineffective parenting (Kumpfer, 1993). More specifically, researchers have learned that 30 to 40 percent of antisocial behavior of early offenders, who are those most likely to become violent and chronic offenders later, can be tied to harsh, inconsistent parenting during the preschool years (Patterson, 1986; Patterson & Yoeger, 1993). Parents of these early offenders threaten, nag, and scold but seldom follow through (Patterson, 1986). This teaches children to resolve conflict through coercion—specifically whining, yelling, temper tantrums, or physical attacks (Patterson, 1994). This aggressive behavior leads to rejection by prosocial peers, trouble with teachers, and poor school performance (Patterson, Debaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Negative consequences snowball, and these youngsters, who are

poorly monitored by their parents, drift into deviant peer groups (Dishion, Patterson, & Griesler, 1994) and increase their use of illegal substances (Dishion, French, & Patterson, 1995). Over time, they fail to develop the skills for stable work or marriages that might enable them to drop out of crime as an adult (Caspi, Elder, & Bem, 1987; Patterson & Yoerger, 1993).

Based on this evidence of family and peer influence, it is not surprising that programs focusing disproportionately on individual youth have seldom demonstrated lasting success (Zigler, Taussing, & Black, 1992). But one family-focused program for antisocial children, hailed as one of our most promising interventions (Kazdin, 1987), is the Oregon Social Learning Center's Parent Management Training. This program was designed for families whose children have, by early adolescence, already come to the attention of school and juvenile justice officials as aggressive and delinquent. As tertiary prevention, it aims to prevent future trouble by these youth, and it succeeds.

Parents in the program receive, on average, 20 hours of training on specific child management practices that help them act more authoritatively, including closer monitoring, conveying clear expectations for behavior, responding effectively to noncompliance, and rewarding positive behavior. In this well-researched program, children from participating families (and also their siblings) displayed less antisocial behavior, with improvements large enough to bring participating youth into the range of normal functioning (Kazdin, 1987; Patterson, 1986, 1994). These results have been replicated in several studies with effects lasting as long as four and a half years (Baum & Forehand, 1981). The benefits have extended beyond the children in the family to their mothers, who experience less depression as a result of the program (Kazdin, 1987; Patterson, 1986, 1994).

The success of this parenting program is remarkable in several respects. First, it has proven effective with high-risk families, often with a child who is already aggressive or in trouble with the law. Second, it has proven effective, not only with children 3 1/2 to 6 years old (63 percent success rate), but also with children 6 1/2 to 12 years old (27 percent success rate). The success rate with older children is impressive because it requires reversing antisocial behavior that is already well established among children experiencing school failure, rejection by prosocial peers, and encouragement by antisocial peers (Patterson, Dishion, & Chamberlain, 1993). Finally, adaptation of this proven parenting program for foster parents has been more effective than traditional group care in preventing delinquent acts among male adolescents with a history of chronic juvenile offenses (see Chamberlain, this report).

Summary of Program Effectiveness

Taken together, these results provide a compelling example of the potential of parent education. In fairness, however, not all family approaches have been this encouraging. Even programs that are similar to these three have not always been able to document similar, positive impacts. These studies show the potential of parenting programs, but they do not guarantee that every program will have similar results.

While we caution against exaggerating the reliability and effectiveness of these programs (Moynihan, 1996; Wilcox & O'Keefe, 1991), it would also be counterproductive to ignore their demonstrated potential. Sawhill has put this balanced view well:

The evidence is always mixed...longer follow-up data are scarce, and it is risky to assume that what is accomplished in small demonstrations by trained and dedicated people will be replicated when the program becomes national in scope...A lack of positive findings may simply reflect insufficient evidence to prove anything one way or the other...one must weigh the risk of doing something and having it not work against the risk of doing nothing and missing an opportunity to improve lives. (Sawhill, 1992, p. 169)

Is Parenting a Proper Issue for Public Policy? Or is it Strictly a Personal Matter?

This question concerns values and judgment, not research findings. Nonetheless, let us suggest that for most people, the best answer is that parenting is both inherently private, and inevitably affected by public policy.

On one hand, our American tradition, born in reaction to the unbridled power of monarchy, has been to protect the private sphere from government intrusion. This view has moderated over time, for example by acceptance of public intrusion into the families of child abusing parents (originally through the use of farmers' animal cruelty laws). But most Americans would still agree that raising the child is the family's responsibility, not the government's.

On the other hand, families don't exist in a vacuum. Families do better when supported by close friendships, good schools, and caring communities. Some communities make it easy to raise children well, while others make it hard. For example, moving families out of Chicago's public housing projects and into working class neighborhoods leads to much more effective parenting in those families and far better outcomes for the children (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1994). These parents don't need more knowledge or better attitudes nearly as much as they need a supportive community for their efforts.

Can Government Policies Promote Good Parenting?

The answer is both yes and no. Public policies, of course, play a strong role in creating the conditions for parents to do their best. Parents themselves voice a desire for government help in the private matter of childrearing. In recent public opinion polls, only 6 percent of parents said government *was doing a great deal* to help them. Yet 47 percent said government *could be doing a great deal* to help them, and 37 percent said government *could do something* to help them (Hewlett and West, 1998).

Government could help families with some of the stresses that parents say make parenting harder today than it used to be—excessive work demands, social isolation, economic pressures, and unsafe streets and neighborhoods (National Commission on Children, 1991b). Policies that support parents deal with such issues as schools, libraries, parks, public health, child care, workplace law, employment programs, family resource centers, and training for foster parents. For example, zoning laws could make it easier to allow child care programs inside residential neighborhoods, encouraging the formation of parenting social networks and a sense of community.

It takes only a moment of reflection to realize that most legislative bills have some impact on family life, just as they often have an economic and an environmental impact. Policymakers do not have a choice about whether to affect family life or not: they already do.

Yet, just because government can do something to help parents, doesn't mean it can do everything. Some of the changes we need to promote good parenting must come from parents themselves.

What Can Parents Do to Promote Good Parenting?

In a recent book on the New York Times best seller list, a renowned social scientist said "The widespread disengagement of parents from the business of childrearing is a public health problem that warrants urgent national attention" (Steinberg, 1996, p.189). Parents may find it difficult to be engaged in childrearing, according to the President of the National Council on Family Relations, because they find themselves competing for time with their children in an over-busy, over-scheduled, over-commercialized society (Doherty, in press). For example, active marketing of clothing to preteens has preempted parent influence on the clothing choices of children as young as 7 and 8. Most educational, economic, recreational, and religious activities are aimed at individuals, thereby pulling families apart, rather than bringing them together (see Doherty, this report).

Because it is difficult to mandate parents to spend more time with children and to legislate cultural changes such as a greater valuing of parenting or less emphasis on materialism, some activists argue that instead of looking to government or professionals, parents must take action themselves (Boyte, 1993). One thing that is needed to promote competent parenting is a nonpartisan, grass roots movement generated and sustained by parents themselves to make family life a priority and to support parents' attempts to create a better balance between time for relationships inside the family and activities outside the family (see Doherty, this report).

In summary, raising children is clearly the parents' responsibility, yet it may fall to policymakers to help create the conditions under which parents can do their best. Government policies to promote good parenting may work best when enacted in a cultural climate that values children and cherishes parents.

What Policy Options and Personal Actions Can Promote Good Parenting?

Because good parenting depends on both the public and private realms, this section identifies both government policies and personal actions that can promote competent parenting. While this list is not intended to be exhaustive, hopefully it will stimulate creative thinking and constructive dialogue about how society as a whole and we as individuals can take steps to promote the type of parenting that produces the responsible citizens and productive workers upon which the future of our nation rests.

Policy Options at the Government Level

Examples of policy options for promoting more competent parenting come from both conservative and liberal sources. They include:

- Community-based family support and parent education programs can provide parents with the knowledge, skills, and social support they need to do their best in raising their children (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1989; Governor's Task Force on Family and Children's Issues, 1990; National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993; National Commission on Children, 1991a; National Commission on Child Welfare and Family Preservation, 1990; United States Department of Education, 1991).
 - Home visiting programs can help parents get off to a good start in raising their children (Governor's Task Force on Family and Children's Issues, 1990; Olds, 1997).
 - Employment policies can provide paid family leave, part-time or job sharing opportunities, and other family-friendly work policies that allow time away from work for family responsibilities (National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993; National Commission on Children, 1991a). Because some employers are not required to participate, the right to family leave and other family-friendly workplace policies could be made more widely available to employees (Skocpol, 1997).
 - Marriage education and enrichment programs have proven to reduce rates of separation and divorce, leading to a more stable environment in which children thrive (National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993; National Commission on Children, 1991a; Resnick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992). Married parenthood can be encouraged through supportive tax policies, benefits, and marriage rules. Yet when marriages fail, systems need to be in place that ensure reliable child support payments (Skocpol, 1997). Also, mandated programs on how to co-parent after divorce have been shown to reduce by half future re-litigation rates over custody and child support (Arbuthnot, Kramer, & Gordon, 1997).
 - Foster parents can benefit from parent training and support. A foster parent education program developed by the Oregon Social Learning Center increases the willingness of foster parents to provide care, prevents multiple foster home placements, and is more effective than group care in
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preventing repeat crimes among chronic juvenile offenders (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Chamberlain & Reid, 1991, 1998).

- Policies that lead to decent incomes, reliable child care, safe neighborhoods, quality schools, and affordable health care give parents the peace of mind that allows them to focus on the important work of raising the next generation (National Commission on Child Welfare and Family Preservation, 1990; National Commission on Children, 1991a).

In addition to taking steps to enact these specific family policies, policymakers can promote a family perspective in any legislation by the following actions:

- Policymakers can raise questions about how legislation would affect family well-being, just as the economic or environmental impacts of legislation are routinely considered in policy debate. Specifically, policymakers can ask in what ways families contribute to a problem, how they are affected by it, and whether they should be involved in the solution (Ooms, 1990).
- Policymakers can require parent or family criteria in any evaluations of programs or policies that affect families.

Actions at the Personal Level

- Family coalitions can be organized to develop and actively pursue policies that would strengthen families and support their decision to make family time a priority (Doherty, this volume).
- Just as parents used to receive support at barn raisings, church meetings, and other community gatherings, communities could provide opportunities for parents to get to know each other and to become familiar with community rules and standards for childrearing (e.g., curfews, age of dating, rules regarding teen alcohol use; United States Department of Education, 1991).
- A broad menu of parent education opportunities could be offered through businesses, civic clubs, religious institutions, and schools (Governor's Task Force on Family and Children's Issues, 1990; National Commission on America's Urban Families, 1993; National Commission on Children, 1991a; National Commission on Child Welfare and Family Preservation, 1990; United States Department of Education, 1991).
- Volunteers can establish parents' groups, organize neighborhood activities, and lend clothes, books, computers, and toys to neighbors with children (National Commission on Children, 1991a; United States Department of Education, 1991).

In summary, government and personal options can be quite distinct from each other, but they also can overlap. For example, government can provide seed money to jump-start the formation of family coalitions or public forums at the community level. These family coalitions, in turn, could develop a range of strategies to make family time a priority, which could include advocating for specific family-friendly government policies.

What Parenting Efforts Are Being Tried in Other States?

To develop and evaluate legislation, state legislators are often interested in what other states are doing. The Harvard Family Research Project identified five pioneering states that have developed preventive, family-oriented services on a broad or statewide basis—Connecticut, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, and Missouri. The goals, services, sponsorship, and funding of these five states are summarized in the Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar Briefing Report, “Can Government Promote Competent Parenting?” This report also includes more than 25 policy recommendations from six different sources that span the political spectrum. Download the full report at http://www.familyimpactseminars.org/s_wifis13report.pdf.

How Can Legislators Evaluate Parenting Legislation or Initiatives?

To help evaluate legislative proposals, the previously mentioned briefing report on parenting lists several principles for assessing how successful a parenting initiative is likely to be. Successful programs are ecological, collaborative, long-term, have terrific staff, are targeted to specific ages and outcomes, intervene at critical periods, build on existing strengths, and allow for individual differences. For ordering information, see the introduction to this briefing report or contact Meg Wall Wild at (608) 262-8121.

Conclusion

In their importance to both policymakers and the public, child and family issues are now at their strongest point in recent decades. However, as one scholar recently lamented, there is often little connection between what is funded and the specific programs known to be effective or most promising (Carter, 1996). While the knowledge created by the research community grows at a slow pace and seldom seems to provide the facts needed by policymakers today, we at least have knowledge of some flagship programs, and perhaps enough knowledge to help us avoid jumping on the latest bandwagon. We know enough, at least, to increase the odds that parenting education programs will deliver on their promise. Fulfilling this promise may depend on a dual-pronged focus of moving forward on both a government and a personal front.

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