

EFFECTIVE PARENTING: POSITIVE SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES AND THEIR CAREGIVERS

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recognizes the tremendous impact families¹ have on children’s development of cognitive, academic, social–emotional, and behavioral skills. NASP endorses policies and practices that (a) underscore the importance of supporting new parents, (b) empower families to be active partners in students’ education, and (c) support families in their use of effective, positive parenting practices (NASP, 2010). The National Standards for Family-School Partnerships (PTA, 2008) stress the importance of school collaboration with families in supporting students’ learning and healthy development, “with regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively” (Standard 3). For example, family encouragement and focus on cognitive development, vocabulary, and early literacy have been associated with increased school readiness, engagement, and success (Dearing & Tang, 2010). For adolescents, parental monitoring and parent–child connectedness protect adolescents from a variety of risky behaviors and emotional distress, including substance use, early sexual behavior, and violence (Resnick et al., 1997). In addition, a general set of effective parenting practices may be drawn from the professional literature (Moore & Patterson, 2009).

Children’s out-of-school time and experiences, particularly in the home environment, are related to in-school behavior, engagement, and achievement (Minke & Anderson, 2005). Furthermore, children who exhibit behavioral difficulties frequently do so across home and school. Effective parenting practices reduce the incidence of behavioral concerns across settings (Stormshak, Bierman, McMahon, & Lengua, 2000). Effective parenting is characterized by setting clear expectations, teaching expected behaviors, having regular family routines (e.g., meals together), and acknowledging appropriate behavior. In addition, family–school partnership practices that include connecting to school and providing support for student learning positively influence student behavior (Sheridan et al., 2012).

MODELS OF PARENTING EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Although parenting can be complex and multifaceted, many family members report having little or no training in how to best support the positive development of their children over time and in effectively meeting the everyday challenges that are encountered (Nemours Foundation, 2013). Options for parent training typically include: (a) parent education and/or (b) family intervention or *parent management training*. School psychologists can play a critical role in determining how best to support families on a continuum of needs for parental learning and skill development.

¹ Throughout this document, the term *family* refers to any and all persons who function to support, care for, and raise children, including extended biologically related (e.g., grandparents) and nonbiologically related (e.g., foster parents) individuals.

Parent education programs promote the use of effective parenting strategies and have been developed for various developmental levels. These programs focus on general parenting issues, such as communication and substance use prevention, and tend to be geared towards a wide range of parents who voluntarily seek to better parent their children and prevent problems from occurring.

Family intervention or parent management training programs typically address specific concerns or behaviors that are interfering with optimal learning and development. These programs require a complex set of procedures; thus, it is often recommended that such training be implemented by a school psychologist and parent working collaboratively, perhaps in conjunction with a community resource or other mental health professional.

BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL–EMOTIONAL SUPPORTS

The following strategies are adapted from Moore and Patterson (2009) to represent core elements of effective parenting: (a) observe and define behaviors; (b) use reinforcement and positive attention with behavioral expectations to teach, enhance, and shape prosocial behaviors (i.e., use positive behavior support); (c) manage consequences for behaviors, use limit setting, and provide corrective feedback; and (d) promote generalization. In addition, Dishion, Stormshak, and Kavanagh (2012) provided a useful framework to structure parenting interactions with families.

Observe and define. The first step to address behavior concerns is to identify the primary behavior that is problematic (i.e., the target behavior). A common behavior concern at home is noncompliance (e.g., failing to complete tasks; Moore & Patterson, 2009). After the behavior is identified and clearly defined, a goal should be set and information should be collected to track the behavior (e.g., a frequency count of noncompliance from 4:00 p.m.–5:00 p.m.). It can also be helpful to track what happens before (i.e., antecedents) and after (i.e., consequences) the child exhibits the target behavior (Dishion et al., 2012).

Use positive behavior support. After behavior concerns are specified, it is important to develop procedures that will allow adults in the environment to support children’s appropriate behavior (e.g., compliance; Dishion et al., 2012). This is accomplished in four primary ways: (a) identifying and teaching expectations, (b) providing positive praise and attention for appropriate behavior, (c) using items or privileges the child prefers as incentives for appropriate behavior, and (d) minimizing attention and access to preferred items for inappropriate behavior.

Manage consequences, use limit setting, and provide corrective feedback. After parents are consistently and effectively using positive behavior support strategies, it is appropriate to consider adjusting consequences while introducing limit setting and opportunities for corrective feedback (Moore & Patterson, 2009). For example, parents may find it useful to create and teach a small number of positively stated house rules which can provide an opportunity to identify, acknowledge, and provide positive attention for children following the house rules. When house rules are broken, parents may choose a limit setting strategy that all adults in the home agree about and that can be implemented consistently (Dishion et al., 2012). Consequences should be structured so attention for the infraction is minimized while corrective feedback is provided (e.g., “You did not follow my instruction to pick up your ball, so you are going to time out.”) and consequences are implemented immediately and consistently. In addition, actively ignoring minor misbehavior continues to be critical, while waiting for an opportunity to provide positive attention and access to preferred items and privileges (Dishion et al., 2012).

Promote generalization. School psychologists can work with families to generalize the family's use of effective parenting skills for other behaviors or settings and to encourage children to exhibit appropriate behavior in other relevant areas of their life (e.g., after a child is compliant with parent instructions at home, it could be appropriate to target behavior at a grocery store; Moore & Patterson, 2009). It is also important that congruence in procedures across home and school are established and maintained. Effective parenting strategies should be linked with school behavior through consistent and meaningful multidirectional communication among parents and educators, such as through use of a daily report card or journal between home and school that allows parents and educators opportunities to share information. When families and schools work together, children experience how such collaboration supports consistency.

COGNITIVE AND ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

Parenting and home environments are reliably associated with children's cognitive and academic development. Dearing and Tang (2010) noted similarities across practices that can support parenting, cognitive development, and academic achievement. These include: (a) an environment that is conducive to learning, (b) parent engagement in learning activities, and (c) parent-child relationships and emotional support.

Establish home environments conducive to learning. Access to and variety of learning materials are important considerations in establishing home environments that are conducive to learning. Correlational studies indicate an association between the availability of learning materials in the home and achievement, as well as other desirable attitudes and behaviors (e.g., interest in reading). In addition, it is important that learning materials match children's developmental stages and interests (Dearing & Tang, 2010).

Engage in learning activities with children. Parents play an important role in promoting children's learning through language interactions, shared book reading and similar activities, and direct teaching (Dearing & Tang, 2010). The amount and quality (e.g., encouragement, sentence complexity, shared reminiscing) of language interaction between parents and children are related to vocabulary growth and achievement. Similarly, shared book reading and problem-solving provide occasions for increased interactions, vocabulary development, and language usage. Parental attitudes and encouragement in homework appear to be particularly facilitative of more positive student outcomes (Dearing & Tang, 2010).

Promote high-quality relationships and provide emotional support. An authoritative parenting style (e.g., warmth, consistency, high expectations, structure) as opposed to permissive (e.g., warmth but with few expectations, little structure) or authoritarian (e.g., restrictive, punitive, low in warmth, high structure) is associated with more positive attitudes, work ethic, and achievement (Dearing & Tang, 2010). In particular, secure attachments to parents are associated with more positive cognitive and academic performance. In general, parental responsiveness and affection are associated with child self-regulation and internalization of parents' goals and values.

CONSIDERATIONS

Although there are several considerations in the provision of parenting support, sensitivity and understanding of student and family diversity are among the most important. Cultural variations in

family belief systems and parenting practices exist (Hill, 2010), which may be reflected in family expectations of the student and school, communication patterns, and home support for learning. School psychologists and other educators must also be aware of the many different family configurations. Parenting may be shared across generations, stepparents, and extended family (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents, and close friends in the community). In addition, families and educators must recognize and support individual differences and needs of children (e.g., temperament, gender, chronic medical conditions, disabilities). Positive parenting practices are flexible to the needs of children and family context.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS IN PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

School psychologists can communicate information and strategies to support student learning and healthy development for *all* parents, families, and those filling a parental role for children, including systems-level and individual family-level supports. In working at a school-wide level, schools should aim to use proactive, partnership-centered strategies. For example, school psychologists might provide handouts, e-mails, flyers, or websites with parenting strategies and information; hold parent education sessions; conduct needs assessments to determine family preferences and interests for additional support and information; and work with others to explicitly link school curricula with home activities.

Individual and extended families may benefit from learning about specific parenting strategies. Depending on the need that exists in a school, school psychologists could provide parent education classes to a small number of families in a group setting or offer support groups for families with specific needs (e.g., students with disabilities). Finally, school psychologists could also work with individual families to implement specific intervention programs or provide more intensive support in the acquisition of effective parenting strategies, and can use their knowledge of community resources to assist with access to appropriate supports.

Regardless of the specific approach or format, school psychologists should facilitate establishing procedural congruence across home and school, and use multidirectional communication to allow families and educators opportunities to initiate and respond to ideas. Parents and educators are partners who collaboratively develop and maintain supportive environments for students.

SUMMARY

NASP endorses policies and practices that (a) emphasize the active role of families (including other caring adults) in children's education and lives and (b) support families in their efforts to be effective, positive parents. School psychologists work to support all parents as well as provide consultation and intervention assistance to those in need of more individualized assistance to acquire and implement effective parenting strategies.

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