

## **From uncertainty to support: communicating with new parents through newsletters**

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### **Abstract**

Many parents seek information as a way to cope with the uncertainties and challenges related to the birth of a child. Using an uncertainty reduction framework, a qualitative study was conducted to examine the effectiveness of newsletters as a means of communicating with new parents. Responses gathered from 223 new parents indicated that newsletters appear to enhance parent's confidence, knowledge, and skills. Also, newsletters are seen as engaging, accessible, timely, and of high quality. Thus, given the relatively low cost of age-paced newsletters, they appear to be an effective way for parent educators to assist new parents.

**Key words:** birth of child, mailed information, newsletter, parenting

### **Introduction**

Becoming a new parent can be a time of great joy, but also a time of uncertainty and stress due to the developmental demands and temperament of a new baby, feelings of inadequacy as a parent, family role adjustments, and changing couple relationships (Belsky and Kelly 1994; Cox, Paley, Burchinal and Payne 1999). New parents often seek information as a means for coping with this uncertainty and stress (Schultz and Vaughn 1999; Young and others 1998). One source of information is age-paced newsletters targeted at parents with young children (Martin and Weigel 1993). The purpose of this study was to apply an uncertainty reduction framework to better understand the impact of newsletters on new parents.

### **Communicating with new parents**

During the transition to parenting, parents must make major adjustments to new responsibilities and roles, which can affect their perceptions of both themselves and their infants (Cox and others

1999; Stamp 1994). Parenting may be especially challenging for those parents who lack experience, knowledge, and problem-solving skills (Weigel and Martin 1996). Parents who believe that the challenges of parenthood are beyond their capacities to cope are more likely to develop negative attitudes about their parenting abilities (Mulsow and others 2002). On the other hand, the challenges of parenthood can facilitate interpersonal development and psychological growth, particularly among those parents who feel supported and valued (Cowan and Cowan 2000).

When faced with the uncertainties and challenges of being a new parent, many parents report a desire for more information (Weigel and Martin 1996). One specific method for delivering such information is age-paced parenting newsletters mailed to new parents. Age-paced newsletters are keyed to babies' birth months so parents receive information that is appropriate for their baby. So, for example, parents of two-month-olds get information about what to expect during the next month. Studies have indicated that such newsletters are effective in increasing parenting knowledge and are well-liked by parents who have received them (Cudaback, and others 1985; Riley 1997; Riley and others 1991). A higher percentage of parents report that age-paced newsletters are a very useful source of information compared to six other common sources of parenting help, including physicians or nurses; books, magazines, or newspapers; relatives and in-laws; other parents and friends; child care providers; and County Health Nurses (Riley and others 1991). Also, parents report that reading newsletters causes them to change their behavior in aspects such as responding to a baby more quickly and providing more stimulation (Riley and others 1991).

### **Uncertainty reduction and parenting**

Uncertainty reduction theory can provide a framework for understanding how newsletters may communicate with new parents. Uncertainty reduction theory is built upon the idea that the existence of uncertainty causes dissonance for people and creates a desire to reduce uncertainty (Berger 1997; Berger and Calabrese 1975). As Brashers (2001) states, "Uncertainty exists when details of situations are ambiguous, complex, unpredictable, or probabilistic; when information is unavailable or inconsistent; and when people feel insecure in their own state of knowledge or the state of knowledge in general" (p. 478). People engage in some form of communication behavior (e.g., seeking information from print sources) as a way to reduce the uncertainty (Berger and Calabrese 1975). Successful uncertainty reduction leads to increased ability to explain and predict events.

Uncertainty arises when people have difficulty explaining past occurrences (e.g., "Why did my baby act that way?") or predict future occurrences (e.g., "If I do \_\_\_\_, what effect will it have on my baby?"). With regard to the birth of a baby, new parents may experience uncertainty with a life-changing event that is often complex, unpredictable, and overwhelming, one in which a

jumble of conflicting and inconsistent information exists, and where feelings of insecurity and inadequacy as parents are common (Crnic and Low 2002). In fact, Weigel and Martin (1996) found that many parents do not feel capable and successful as parents, experience heightened stress, and have inaccurate information about their child's growth, development, and guidance.

A key strategy for reducing or managing uncertainty is information seeking (Berger 1997; Berger and Calabrese 1975). Increased information helps reduce uncertainty by decreasing stress and anxiety while enhancing a sense of personal control (Brashers 2001). Thus, given the uncertainty associated with the transition to parenthood, it would be expected that new parents would seek out information to help reduce their uncertainty. In addition, information that reduces or helps manage uncertainty is often seen as supportive by providing knowledge, enhancing skills, or increasing feelings of personal control and efficacy (Brashers 2001). When communication helps reduce uncertainty, it enhances people's ability to predict events in the coping process, which, in turn, enhances their sense of control and ability to manage stress (Ford and others 1996). Thus, in addition to providing information, newsletters may have the potential to enhance parents' feelings of support.

### **Overview of study**

This paper reports on a study that explored whether age-paced newsletters for parents function as a means of addressing uncertainty by providing information and support. A limitation of earlier research on parenting newsletters is that the items assessing knowledge gain, usefulness, or support were researcher-defined rather than parent-defined. In other words, when constructing their questionnaires, the researchers decided beforehand what knowledge was important to assess and what feelings should be measured. Because these outcomes and perceptions were defined in an a priori fashion, it is not clear whether they are the most salient ones for new parents.

In the present study, we asked new parents open-ended questions about how reading parenting newsletters may have impacted their parenting experience. This method has the advantage of allowing parents to describe, in their own words, the most important ways parenting newsletters impact them. The use of open-ended questions allows parents to relay their own unique perspectives and meanings about their parenting experiences, free from categories and questions pre-defined by researchers. In this way, we hoped to expand upon the results of previous research on parenting newsletters by uncovering more depth and substance as to ways newsletters communicated with new parents.

Therefore, based on the literature presented earlier in this paper, the study was designed to address several questions: Can mailed parenting information increase new parents' knowledge? Can mailed parenting information add to new parents' skills? Can mailed parenting information

increase new parents' feelings of personal control and efficacy? How do new parents view mailed parenting information as a means of communication?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

A total of 223 parents participated in the study. Most (89.7 percent) were women with an average age of 33 years. The median reported family incomes fell between \$3,333-\$4,100 per month, and the majority (86 percent) was married. Almost half of the respondents (45.5 percent) were employed full time, 21.1 percent were employed part-time, and 32.9 percent were not working outside the home. Most (96.8 percent) had graduated from high school, and 17.5 percent had 4-year or post-graduate college degrees. More than half (60.3 percent) of the sample were parents for the first time and had started receiving the parenting newsletters when their babies were less than 12 months of age. The majority was white (90.3 percent), followed by Asian (3.7 percent), Hispanic (2.8 percent), and other (3.2 percent).

### **Procedures**

Participants in the study were parents who had subscribed to a newsletter series through prenatal classes, hospitals, WIC offices, Head Start programs, and other community agencies. Participants typically enrolled in response to a promotional flyer or direct invitations from staff at the various agencies. Parents began receiving the age-appropriate newsletter issue that matched the ages of their infants and toddlers, and continued receiving the newsletters until their child reached 3 years of age. Pregnant women began receiving newsletters shortly before the expected due date of their babies.

To gather parents' opinions, a postage-paid return questionnaire was included in the final issue mailed to parents, when their children were ages 35-36 months. The questionnaire was mailed out over a 12-month period to those parents receiving the last issue each month. A total of 1,312 questionnaires were mailed with the final issue and 223 were returned, creating a return rate of 17 percent.

### **Newsletter**

This study involved one age-paced parent newsletter series, *Little Lives: A Parent's Guide to Development* (Martin and Waugh 1993). The newsletter was designed to provide parents with information and support for the first three years of their baby's life. The 24-issue series was designed for a general audience, written at a 5th- to 6th-grade reading level and included information on child development, health, nutrition, and safety, as well as inexpensive games

and activities to stimulate early development. The newsletters also were written to help parents deal with stress and encouraged parents to use appropriate discipline. The newsletters were sent monthly during the first year and every other month for the next two years, so that the information provided was keyed to the age of the recipient's child.

### **Measures**

In addition to demographic questions, the questionnaire had several open-ended questions designed to elicit parents' own words about the impact of the newsletter series. First, to gain a sense of participants' impressions of their parenting experiences, they were asked to respond to the question, "In your own words, how would you describe your parenting experience so far?" A second question asked, "Has the newsletter helped in your parenting experiences? If yes, please tell us in what ways it has been helpful." From this we hoped to elicit parents' comments about ways the newsletter series had touched their lives as parents. To probe further, we also asked, "Do you have a story of a specific instance in which some particular information in the newsletter was helpful?" Finally, we asked the question, "In your opinion, how well do newsletters communicate with parents of young children?" as a way to more directly gather parents' opinions of the printed newsletter series as a means of communicating with parents. All questions were followed by spaces in which parents could respond in their own words.

### **Coding process**

A five-step process was used to analyze responses to the open-ended questions. Using an analytic induction procedure (Bulmer 1979), themes were allowed to emerge from the coding process rather than being imposed before hand. First, a total of 2,432 unique responses were extracted from the questionnaires and each unique response was typed on a slip of paper. Responses to all of the open-ended questions were mixed together so as not to bias potential themes that might underlie parents' responses. In the second step, the authors independently took each response and attempted to create a preliminary coding scheme by identifying underlying themes within the responses. These preliminary coding schemes were then compared and after a few false starts, a scheme involving seven themes was developed. In the third step, each coder used the preliminary coding scheme to independently code approximately 25 percent of the responses. The coders then compared their results and refined their thematic categories. The refined coding scheme was then used in the fourth step to code an additional 25 percent of the responses. After comparing the results of the second round of coding, in the final step the two coders independently coded all 2,432 responses. After all responses had been coded, there was a 90.5 percent agreement in coding between the two coders. Where disagreements occurred, the codes were discussed and agreement was reached.

## Results

### Parenting experience

Parents first were asked about their overall parenting experiences to date. Four tones were evident in their answers. The majority of parents described their parenting experience as positive but challenging, having both ups and downs, good and bad days. Their responses, however, were characterized by strong emotions and passions. A total of 128 (59.8 percent) of parents fell within this category.

- "Being a parent is very challenging as well as rewarding. At times its very difficult, then you look in your child's eyes and everything is worthwhile."
- "Some great days, some good days, some not so good days and some real bad days! Always a joy and a well worthwhile path."
- "Rewarding, Challenging, Fun, Emotional, Confusing, the best things in life."
- "Wonderful but not as easy as I always imagined it would be."

An additional 51 (23.8 percent) parents described their experiences as strongly positive.

- "The total experience has been a joy."
- "Wonderful experience! What a joy in our lives she is. Watching her growth every day is amazing."
- "I have enjoyed every minute of being a parent. My 3 yr. old brings me joy and happiness each day. I am always amazed as to how much she knows."

On the other hand, only eight (3.7 percent) parents described their parenting experiences as negative.

- "Stressed, making my relationship with my wife more difficult."
- "Rough and rocky road. Not as easy as I first had thought."
- "I have had more challenges with my little guy and how to make sense of how he reacts to things and his different way of playing. It has been most challenging."

Nine (4.2 percent) descriptions were deemed ambivalent, lacking the passion of the positive and negative groups. For example, one parent just replied "O.K." and another responded with "Trial & Error." Finally, 18 (8.4 percent) descriptions were not interpretable.

## **Impact on parents**

Parents also were asked if the newsletter helped in their parenting experiences, and if so, in what ways. An overwhelming percentage (94.2 percent) indicated that the newsletter was helpful. We then examined parents' open-ended answers as to the ways the newsletter was helpful. After coding the themes that recurred in parents' responses, three themes emerged that pertained to the usefulness of the series and ways in which the newsletters impacted their ability to parent. These themes included parents' references to, or examples of knowledge gains, reassurance and parental confidence, and use of information from the newsletters.

## **Knowledge gains**

A total of 178 (79.8 percent) of the parents indicated that they received information and gained new knowledge about parenting from the newsletter. For example, a number of parents relayed how they gained a better understanding of normal growth and development of their child.

- "It has given us a point of reference with which to judge our child's progress."
- "...it has taught me a lot about her developmental stages. It has taught me what to expect from her and how to handle certain problems."
- "In different guidance and discipline as well as what to look forward to!!"
- "...information about raising children that I had not thought of."

Thus, it appears that a number of parents gain information from the newsletters to help them cope with the challenges of parenting and enhance their understanding of their children.

## **Reassurance and parental confidence.**

Parents also offered a variety of examples of ways the newsletters were reassuring and helped them feel more confident. A total of 107 (47.9 percent) of the parents reported this theme. Several parents cited how the newsletter reinforced what they were already doing or how their experiences were typical and shared with other parents. For example,

- "It seems like we are constantly second guessing ourselves — and when a new issue would arrive, you were right on target with what was going on — in our home, anyway."
- "Reassured me that I'm doing the right thing and that I'm not alone."
- "There are times in parenting when you wonder what you are doing is correct and if what your child is doing or going through is normal. The Little Lives newsletters seem to know just what needs to be talked about in each letter."
- Other parents indicated that they felt more confident in their parenting abilities as a result of reading the newsletter.

- "It gave me confidence that I was doing the right things."

This finding corroborates the suggestion that parenting newsletters can bolster feelings of support.

### **Use of information**

A third theme was found in 71 (31.8 percent) of parental responses and related to parents' use of information in the newsletter. Parents relayed how they employed information found in the newsletter concerning guidance techniques, health and safety, developmental games and activities, and couple relationships.

- "...discipline has been very hard for me with my 3 year old. My two older children listened and didn't seem to be as out going as him. And the tips for discipline have helped a lot because his dad has the old fashioned spank and yell method. I don't so I had him read those articles so he would try to change his habits. And we don't argue about it."
- "...little lives helped me a lot for example when my baby started teething I took the advice. I also followed through with some of the games that were suggested."
- "When I first began receiving the newsletter there was a paragraph about communication within your marriage and the importance of maintaining it. At the time it was an eye opener because I realized our communication had started to 'drag' which wasn't quite normal for us. I cut the article out and put it on the fridge. My husband later saw it and asked if there was anything I wanted to talk about. Now 3 years later every night we talk about our day just as we're getting ready for bed. It's become a tradition."

This theme indicated that in addition to influencing people's knowledge and feelings about parenting, reading newsletters can lead to changes in parenting behaviors.

### **Newsletters as a way to communicate with parents**

Four themes emerged concerning the effectiveness of printed newsletters as a method to convey information and communicate with parents. These themes included engagement, accessibility, timeliness, and high quality.

### **Engagement**

Overall, 186 parents (83.4 percent) felt that the newsletters were engaging and communicated well with parents. Engagement related to the appeal of the newsletters and how the issues were interesting, enjoyable to read, and were inviting to parents. Comments included:



- "Little Lives is an interesting and fun, easy reading newsletter."
- "It was easy to read yet contained much information."

### **Accessibility**

Forty-four parents (19.7 percent) indicated that the newsletter provided a reasonable amount of information that was not overwhelming and written in an easy-to-read format. Parents relayed comments that the format and style made the information in the newsletters easily accessible.

- "Your newsletter is quick and easy to read. Bulky parenting books can be overwhelming and often never get picked up. They contain too much information."
- "They are always easy reading...that helps to make access to info easier."  
Also, because it came to their homes, they could share it with other family members.
- "It's short and to the point, timely, and the only thing I get my husband to read."

### **Timeliness**

A third theme concerning the newsletters' ability to communicate with parents related to its perceived timeliness. This theme was found in 17 (7.6 percent) parental responses. Parents reported that the information in the newsletter came when it was needed—timed to a child's developmental age.

- "With so much physical and mental development going on in such a compact period of time, it's easy to forget what to expect and when."
- "Your newsletter gets to the point about important issues and milestones every few months."
- "It feels like a 'mystery friend' because issues were addressed right about the time I was wondering about them."

### **High quality**

Finally, 16 (7.2 percent) parents felt confident about the quality and accuracy of the information in the newsletter and compared it favorably to the more imposing amounts of information often contained in parenting books and magazines. Parents expressed that they could trust the information in the newsletter.

- "It was all helpful and informative."
- From a grandmother raising a grandchild, "I found the series to be excellent in content and ideas..."

### **Connection between parenting experience and themes**

Chi-square tests were used to examine whether the occurrence of the themes that emerged in parents' opinions of the usefulness and effectiveness of the newsletter series were associated with reports of parenting experiences. No significant associations were found. Thus, participants' parenting experiences did not appear to color their views of the usefulness of the newsletter nor the ways in which it communicated with new parents.

### **Conclusions**

The results of this study imply that parenting newsletters can touch parents on a variety of levels — knowledge gains (cognitive), reassurance and confidence (affective), and use of information (behavioral). Further, parents who participated in this study identified what it is about these parenting newsletters that make them particularly effective at communicating with parents — the newsletters are engaging, accessible, timely, and of high quality. This study extended previous research on age-paced newsletters by allowing parents to describe, in their own words, how printed parenting information has touched their lives as parents. Parents' comments provided insight concerning their perceptions of the effectiveness of this newsletter series and its value as a device for providing support and education.

In addition, the current findings highlighted how the effectiveness of newsletters in reaching new parents can be understood from an uncertainty reduction framework. A key aspect of uncertainty reduction theory is that people seek information to reduce uncertainty. Results indicate that the information contained in *Little Lives: A Parent's Guide to Development* may increase parenting knowledge and change behavior. For instance, several parents identified specific ideas or strategies they both learned from the newsletters and successfully implemented with their children. Furthermore, information that reduces uncertainty is often seen as supportive. A number of parents reported heightened feelings of confidence and reassurance in their parenting abilities. In these ways, parenting newsletters may help alleviate the uncertainty that often arises with being a new parent.

The study had limitations that need to be kept in mind when drawing conclusions from the findings. One shortcoming was that some participants were more verbose than others. Some parents wrote one or two sentence answers while others wrote answers that filled a full page. The more complete the answers, the more likely they were to contain multiple themes. Also, the response rate was lower than would be hoped, though not unexpected with the survey method used in this study (Dillman 1978). Nevertheless, it is not possible to ascertain how the responses of the parents who returned their surveys were representative of all parents who received the newsletter series. Finally, the sample consisted primarily of white, middle class, well-educated parents, with a majority of those in their 30s. Although there were some respondents who had

lower incomes and educational levels, additional research is needed to determine if the findings generalize to more at-risk parents or parents with more diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Finally, data were collected from parents receiving one specific newsletter series (Little Lives: A Parent's Guide to Development). There are many other newsletter series presently offered across the country by Cooperative Extension systems, non-profit agencies, and commercial organizations. A content analysis (Graham 2002) of Cooperative Extension newsletters indicates that most share the goal of reaching parents with timely information, although they sometimes differ in terms of content, length, and reading level. Even though, it seems likely that the findings in this study would generalize to parenting newsletters similar to Little Lives: A Parent's Guide to Development, additional research is needed to see if similar results would be obtained from parents receiving the full variety of newsletters across the county.

When combined with the results of previous quantitative studies on age-paced newsletters (e.g., Cudaback and others 1985; Riley 1997; Riley and others 1991), the results of this study reinforce the effectiveness of age-paced newsletters in communicating with new parents. The use of newsletters offers an alternative, economical method of reaching large numbers of parents. The growing body of evidence suggests that newsletters can be a helpful and effective way for educators to communicate with new parents.

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