

Showcase North Carolina: Family Outreach Study Guides Parent Education Programming for Moore County

Karen Wicker

Abstract

To identify what parents of young children need to prepare their children for school, a Family Outreach Study was conducted by the Moore County Center of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service. It was found that parents of young children sometimes feel they do not have the resources, support, nor skills to fulfill their role. It was also observed that although parents are motivated and have the desire to make changes for their children, they sometimes lack the skills and resources to take action. To address the needs identified in the Family Outreach Study, **Parent Centers** and the **Parent Leadership Institute** were implemented.

Educational information and support for parents in Moore County has been fragmented in its approach to reach parents and to meet their needs. Through the years there have been parenting workshops for social service-referred and court-referred parents. There have been preschool story hours for parents of young children, and countywide health fairs to screen young children for delays. There has not been an overwhelming response by parents to either attend educational workshops or readily request information concerning their children. The goal, however, of Moore County parenting education programs is to motivate parents to attend educational workshops and to ask for information that could build their knowledge and skills in nurturing appropriate growth of their children.

In June 2000, a national benchmark study was commissioned to measure the level of accurate knowledge American adults have about child development issues. The study, entitled *What Grown-ups Understand About Child Development* (DYG, Inc. 2000), reports that adults are considered well-informed about many areas of child development. However, there were significant gaps in other important areas. These gaps carry with them very real implications for how we raise and interact with our children in America today. The report concluded that filling in gaps of information for parents could make a real difference for young children in being prepared to enter school.

Targeting parents

The Moore County Partnership for Children and Families funds projects that improve school readiness for young children. A significant part of the process of distributing funds is to determine what was needed in the areas of child care, health, and family support related to young children.

To begin studying the types of support that parents and families need to help their children become successful, the Moore County Center of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service organized a Family Support Task Force. The Family Support Task Force members included representatives from Moore County schools, the child care community, FirstHealth, as well as parents and grandparents from communities throughout the county.

The Family Support Task force was awarded \$5,000 by the Moore County Partnership for Children to implement a Family Outreach Study. The Family Support Task Force visually and graphically mapped out the county and formulated focus groups and written surveys to be distributed to parents of young children. Seven focus groups (including a total of 52 parents) were held throughout the county. Additionally, 125 written surveys were collected from various communities. After the data was compiled, recommendations from the focus groups and written surveys were offered through a written report.

Priority needs identified by parents were

- support and networking opportunities for parents
- support and resources for expectant and new parents
- understanding of child development practices
- affordable, quality child care in all communities
- resources for nurturing themselves and their children
- respect and recognition for the job they do.

Several agencies used the Family Outreach Study as a program planning guide. Based on the findings, the Moore County Center of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service received Smart Start funding for two projects: **Parent Centers** and the **Parent Leadership Institute**. These pilot projects used a community-based approach to work with parents providing child development information, resources, and support.

Implementing programs to meet the needs of parents

Parent Centers were developed to place educational resources in child care centers where parents could have easy access to them. **Parent Centers** consisted of bookshelves stocked with children's books, parenting books, videos, and publications for parents to checkout. Parent advisory committees were organized at each of the four pilot centers to direct the programming and resources for the **Parent Centers**.

Four child care sites were selected and contacted by a countywide advisory committee to pilot and house a **Parent Center**. Child care centers hosting the **Parent Centers** not only provided resources but recruited parents to attend workshops on how to use the **Parent Centers**. Workshops have included the MotherRead curriculum and UNC-TV "Ready to Learn" series. Special needs workshops have been presented on toilet learning, early brain development, and safety for toddlers. Child care is generally provided for parents.

This strategy met the goal of providing information to parents and overcame the workshop attendance concern. Approximately 60 parents and 20 child care providers have been involved by checking out resources from the **Parent Centers** or attending workshops during the first year. According to a pre-survey, 80 percent of parents participating in the **Parents Centers** had not participated in any other kind of family support program in the past. Parents report that having the resources readily available has been a great incentive to check them out. Parents and child care providers attending workshops are reporting increased knowledge about their children's development and an increase in time spent together between parent and child.

A second project, the **Parent Leadership Institute**, was created in communities where focus groups had been held during the Family Outreach Study. While conducting the focus groups facilitators noted that parents were very passionate about being good parents and were interested in taking action to meet some of the needs that were identified, but lacked resources and advocacy skills to carry them out.

The **Parent Leadership Institute** has been conducted in four different communities in Moore County. The Institute involves parents attending eight two-hour sessions to complete modules that were developed using materials from the North Carolina Family Community Leadership Institute designed through the National Extension Homemakers Council. Workshop topics include

- identifying issues
- working in groups

- influencing groups and individuals
- identifying resources
- developing plans of action.

Two **Parent Leadership Institute** groups continue working and are putting plans of action to work.

The **Parent Leadership Institute** has been particularly popular in northern Moore County which has realized a 300 percent increase in the Spanish speaking population over the past 5 years. Spanish-speaking parents have participated in several Extension-sponsored workshops in the past and were eager to participate in the **Parent Leadership Institute**. Parents developed and conducted surveys among English- and Spanish-speaking parents. The surveys confirmed the need for child care slots and sufficient health care, especially for Spanish-speaking families. Two churches that serve the Spanish community in one community and who sponsored **Parent Leadership Institutes** are actively involved in working together to plan for more access to child care in the area. With 16 active parents meeting weekly to plan a new child care facility, the Aztec Christian Church community has already made progress. They have met the North Carolina child care licensing guidelines, have secured child care credential training for parents who will be working in the center, and received a 4-H school-age care grant that will give them seed money to serve 20 school-age children. Plans are to open the school-age care program and follow with the infant and toddler program. In a second church, a group of parents have hired an architect and have had their child care plans approved by the leadership in their church. They hope to open their child care center by next year.

References

DYG, Inc. 2000. *What grown-up's understand about child development: A National benchmark study*. On-line: <http://www.zerotothree.org>

Author

Karen Wicker is the Family and Consumer Sciences agent in the Moore and Montgomery County Centers of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, N.C. State University.

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