

Smart Child Care: Caregiver Education for Parents, Family, Friends, and Neighbors

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Abstract

Smart Child Care is an innovative Extension program designed to teach key childcare skills to family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) caregivers and parents. Results from 82 FFNs and parents, who varied in age and ethnic background, indicated the program is highly effective in increasing knowledge and skills, especially among those with fewer children, among ethnic minorities, and among those who had not previously taken a parenting course. Participant satisfaction was high and did not depend on participant characteristics, suggesting the program is helpful to a broad array of caregivers.

Keywords

Extension, caregiving, child care, education, family, parenting

Introduction

Family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) caregivers help meet the childcare needs of many working parents. The federal Office of Child Care encourages states to develop initiatives that support these caregivers and improve the quality of childcare. A recent study sponsored by the Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS) assessed desire for and extent of FFN services, need for FFN training, and the likelihood of FFNs attendance (DWS 2010). Results indicated that the vast majority (94 percent) of parents preferred having their infant or toddler cared for by FFNs. The study also found that FFNs provide care for most (60 percent) of Utah's infants and toddlers, that most FFNs (63 percent) provided full-time care, and that many FFNs (40 percent) provided care at least one day of the weekend. Though FFN services were shown to be in high demand,

many FFNs reported that they lacked the skills and knowledge they needed. For instance, many reported difficulty addressing routine challenges in caring for infants and toddlers, and many felt isolated and desired interaction with other FFNs.

The state data also suggested FFNs to be intrinsically motivated to provide quality child care, in that 60 percent reported a motivation to help the child's parents, and many FFNs demonstrated a willingness to participate in child care courses and said they would take a course in brain development, child development, and child psychology if it was offered (DWS 2010). Given these findings, and given that FFNs reside throughout Utah, DWS partnered with Utah State University Extension to pilot *Smart Child Care* classes.

Program description

The *Smart Child Care* parenting and child development program used five modules from the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL 2008). A total of nine courses were conducted at Extension centers or child care centers in Salt Lake and Weber counties, taught primarily in two-hour sessions once a week for three weeks.

Participants learned about a variety of topics, including the importance of positive comments, using play, helping children develop friendship skills, making expectations clear, developing and teaching household rules, problem solving, and establishing routines. Because improvements in child care skills are sustained longer if practiced (Gamble et al. 2009), participants role played skills and were encouraged to practice further at home. In addition, participants were asked to describe experiences in which they successfully implemented skills learned the previous week and had opportunities to discuss the application of materials with other participants. Course materials were provided in English and Spanish. Depending on the site, incentives for participation included child care, waiver of child care late fees, helpful books or videos, travel assistance, food, etc. Further details on course materials can be obtained from CSEFEL (2008).

Participants

Subjects for this study were recruited via FNN lists; participating child care centers; and flyers distributed at libraries, schools, and DWS offices, etc. Participants consisted of 82 persons, aged 19 to 80 years old ($M=36$ years, $sd=11.3$). Most ($n=70$) were female. Participants included FFNs ($n=33$) and parents ($n=49$). Child care was provided for the participants' children. Ethnic makeup consisted of Caucasians/Whites ($n=33$), Hispanics/Latinos ($n=30$), Asians/Pacific Islanders ($n=4$), Native Americans ($n=4$), and Other ($n=4$). Most ($n=49$) had never taken a child development course.

Program impacts and participant feedback

Study outcomes reflecting knowledge gained from the program and program feedback were assessed at the conclusion of the course. Using a four-point Likert scale (poor, fair, good, excellent) in a retrospective pre-then-post format (Marshall, Higginbotham, Harris, and Lee 2007), participants were asked to indicate the extent of their knowledge across 20 objectives (e.g., “the importance of building positive relationships with children,” “ways to help children develop friendship skills,” and “how to use the three parts of a behavior plan”). Paired t-tests were used to assess whether each of the 20 postscores improved significantly from their respective pre-scores, and Cohen’s *d* effect sizes were calculated to assess the magnitude of this improvement. Participant ratings of program quality were also assessed. Participants responded to four questions assessing various aspects of program quality (e.g., “the overall quality of the *Smart Child Care* program,” and “the overall quality of the program materials”) on a five-point Likert scale (very poor, poor, average, good, excellent).

Statistically significant differences were found between retrospective pre- and post-scores on all program objectives, indicating that participants reported improvement in all these areas (Table 1). Moreover, on all program objectives pre-post score differences exceeded one standard deviation, indicating substantial improvement. In addition, participant ratings of program quality were high, with responses averaging between good and excellent across all areas (Table 2).

Factors influencing program impacts and participant feedback

In addition to assessing pre-post differences and participant ratings of program quality, analyses were conducted to assess whether these outcomes were influenced by a variety of participant characteristics, including age, gender, participant type (FFN or parent), number of children under care, ethnicity, and whether they had taken a previous parenting course. For these analyses, objectives within each of the five course modules were averaged, as were the four items assessing participant ratings of program quality. In addition, ethnicity was re-categorized into Caucasian/White, Hispanic/Latinos, and Others, which included Asian/Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, and various other ethnicities. Multiple regression models were used to regress pre-post differences and participant ratings on participant characteristics.

Results revealed that in the “Making a Connection” module, pre-post differences were greater among those with fewer children ($B=-0.29$, $p=.03$) and among those belonging to Other ethnicities ($B=0.30$, $p=0.03$), suggesting that in this module these groups benefitted the most. In the “Making it Happen” module and in the “Why Children Do What They Do” module, pre-post differences were greater for those who had not previously taken a parenting course ($B= -0.26$, $p=.06$), and for those belonging to Other ethnicities ($B=0.28$, $p=.05$), respectively. This suggested again that in these respective modules these groups benefitted the most. (See Table 3.) Average

rating of program quality did not depend on any measured participant characteristic (Table 4), suggesting that the program was similarly satisfactory to all types of participants.

Implications for Extension

This investigation found *Smart Child Care* to be effective in addressing the educational needs of FFNs and parents. This was particularly so among those with fewer children, the non-Latino ethnic minorities, and among those with no previous experience with parenting courses. While there was a large variation in age, gender, and ethnicity among the participants, evaluations suggest that all of the participants benefited from attending the class. Irrespective of participant characteristics, the program quality was rated very positively.

Research shows that “Programs resulting in long-term benefits for low-income parents and their families are those that include an opportunity for participants to practice new skills in the training session and encourage participants to model their new behaviors at home” (Gamble et al. 2009, Discussion and Recommendations, paragraph 3). The structure of the *Smart Child Care* classes provided a forum for parents and caregivers to interact and learn new skills. The in-class activities and take-home materials assisted participants in feeling more in control when interacting with children. Representative quotes from participant evaluations included reports of “increased ability to communicate better with children,” “more caring, patient, and understanding,” and “more empathetic while giving children acceptable consequences.”

The reported challenges for *Smart Child Care* are commonplace in Extension. Namely, recruitment and time (Gamble et al. 2009). The participating Extension educators needed to utilize multiple advertising strategies to reach their targeted class sizes. Once people came, however, participants felt more time was needed. One recommendation for practice is to advertise future classes to be 2½ hours in length in order to provide adequate time to present all the curriculum materials and have time for application and interaction with other caregivers.

Previous research has shown that “low-income parents and family child-care-givers attend parenting programs because they are interested in promoting their children’s learning and educational enrichment” (Gamble et al. 2009, Discussion and Recommendations, paragraph 1). This conclusion was validated anew with our sample of parents and family, friend, and neighbor caregivers and was evidenced by the majority of participants indicating they wanted to do a better job at caregiving as a main reason for attending the course.

Collectively, these findings suggest that Extension educators can effectively teach parents and FFN caregivers simultaneously, which is particularly encouraging given that many FFN caregivers live in rural areas where access to formal child care training is limited and citizens are spread out. The findings also underscore the ability of Cooperative Extension to partner with

Departments of Workforce Services in meeting the educational needs of family, friend, and neighbor caregivers.

References

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Table 1. Pre-post differences in knowledge on course objectives

[Table 1 Summary: This table indicates that statistically significant differences were found between pre and post scores on all program objectives, and that on all program objectives, pre-post score differences exceeded one standard deviation.]

Course Objectives	Before Course ^a	After Course ^b	<i>t</i>	p-value	Cohen's <i>d</i>
The importance of social emotional development for children.	2.63	3.57	10.80	<.001	1.30
The importance of building positive relationships with children.	2.91	3.75	8.81	<.001	1.22
The "power" of using positive comments and encouragement.	2.62	3.70	11.82	<.001	1.60
How play can be a powerful parenting practice.	2.67	3.65	9.18	<.001	1.34

Ways to help children develop friendship skills.	2.49	3.27	8.27	<.001	1.0
How building relationships, using positive comments/encouragement, and play are linked to children's behavior.	2.64	3.65	9.87	<.001	1.38
Why children do what they do.	2.40	3.40	12.08	<.001	1.47
Ways to determine the meaning of behavior.	2.23	3.31	10.86	<.001	1.34
How to make expectations clear for children.	2.41	3.49	10.93	<.001	1.47
Effective ways to develop and teach household rules.	2.36	3.51	12.41	<.001	1.53
The concept of emotional vocabulary.	2.37	3.52	10.65	<.001	1.48
Effective ways to teach feeling vocabulary.	2.32	3.44	11.31	<.001	1.43
The use of books to support emotional vocabulary and social-emotional development.	2.41	3.56	11.88	<.001	1.59
How the turtle tuck can be used to cope with feelings of anger and disappointment.	1.84	3.38	13.22	<.001	1.96
How to teach problem-solving skills to children.	2.36	3.48	10.60	<.001	1.52
Specific strategies that can be used to promote positive child behavior in home and community settings.	2.43	3.58	11.61	<.001	1.65
That the problem behavior has meaning.	2.35	3.50	11.35	<.001	1.50
How to identify the meaning of behavior by examining what happens before and after the problem behavior.	2.21	3.40	11.10	<.001	1.47

How to use the three parts of a behavior plan: preventions, new skills to teach, and new responses.	2.12	3.35	11.38	<.001	1.54
How to use the <i>Family Routine Guide</i> with children during daily routines.	2.12	3.34	11.13	<.001	1.52

^a Before course: 1=was poor, 2=was fair, 3=was good, 4=was excellent; ^bAfter course: 1=is poor, 2= is fair, 3= is good, 4= is excellent

Table 2. Participant satisfaction with program quality

[Table 2 Summary: This table indicates that participant ratings of program quality were high.]

Program Quality	Mean Rating ^a
The overall quality of the facilitator’s work.	4.68
The overall quality of the <i>Smart Child Care</i> program.	4.71
The overall quality of the program materials.	4.71
The overall level of group/class discussions.	4.58

^a1=Very Poor, 2=Poor, 3=Average, 4=Good, 5=Excellent

Table 3. Regression coefficients of factors influencing average pre-post differences on module objectives

[Table 3 Summary: This table indicates that some types of participants learned more than other types of participants on some modules.]

Participant Characteristics	Making a Connection	Making it Happen	Why Children Do What They Do	Teach Me What to Do	Facing the Challenge
Age	-0.16	-0.04	0.02	0.01	-0.03
Gender	-0.12	-0.10	0.03	-0.19	-0.12
Course type	-0.05	0.05	-0.02	0.05	0.12
Number of children	-0.29**	0.0	-0.10	-0.01	-0.02

Ethnicity ^a :					
Hispanic/Latino	0.05	-0.09	0.02	-0.07	0.02
Ethnicity ^a : Other	0.30**	0.11	0.28**	0.08	0.12
Taken previous parenting course	-0.05	-0.26*	-0.14	-0.05	-0.02
<i>F</i>	1.80	1.02	1.12	0.40	0.37
<i>p</i>	.11	.43	.37	.90	.92
<i>R</i> ²	.19	.12	.13	.05	.05

p*<.10, *p*<.05

^a Ethnicity dummy coded, with Caucasian/White as the reference category

Table 4. Regression Coefficients of Factors Influencing Average Ratings Program Quality [Table 4 Summary: This table indicates that reported program quality was not related to any of the participant characteristics tested.]

Participant Characteristics	Program Quality ^a
Age	-0.12
Gender	-0.21
Course type	0.18
Number of children	0.06
Ethnicity ^b : Hispanic/Latino	-0.07
Ethnicity ^b : Other	0.05
Taken previous parenting course	0.04
<i>F</i>	0.92
<i>p</i>	.50
<i>R</i> ²	.10

^a Average of participants’ ratings for overall quality of the facilitator's work, overall quality of the *Smart Child Care* program, the overall quality of the program materials, overall level of group/class discussion; ^bEthnicity dummy coded, with Caucasian/White as the reference category