

The Reaching New Parents Project: The Impact of a FCS Extension Resource Guide on New Mothers

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Abstract

As budgets continue to decrease are printed parent educational materials a sensible use of resources? Findings from the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension reveal promising results. Outcomes from an evaluation of a 12-article resource guide for new parents showed high levels of readership, understanding, application, and adjustment to the parental role. Overall, mothers rated the resource positively and as a helpful source of information. Magazine-style resource guides like this may be a cost-effective means of reaching new parents.

Keywords: new parents, parenting, parent education, age-paced, resource guide, printed educational materials

Introduction

Parenting is not something that “just comes naturally,” and parent education for new mothers can be very important for the development of the novice family. Acquired parental knowledge has been shown to help parents feel better prepared to handle the copious stressors involved in the transition to parenthood (Hess, Teti, and Hussey-Gardner 2004). Additionally, most adults learn

best when they have a need for the information presented and when it is delivered in an easily accessible and understandable format (Riley et al. 1991; Weigel and Martin 2004). In fact, parents often prefer written educational materials and rate them as relevant, easy to understand and helpful (Merkowitz et al. 1997; Weigel and Martin 1996).

The use of printed materials has been found to be a cost-effective means of educating parents who may be unlikely to attend face-to-face parent education programming (Bogenschneider and Stone 1997; Nelson 1986; Dickinson and Cudaback 1992; Riley et al. 1991; Weigel and Martin 2004). Further, parents perceive age-paced educational materials as more useful than other common sources of parenting help, including medical professionals, books, magazines or newspapers, child care providers, County health nurses, relatives, in-laws, and other parents and friends (Riley et al. 1991). Consequently, parents who read these educational materials exhibit positive changes in their responsiveness to their baby (Nelson 1986; Riley et al. 1991; Weigel and Martin 2004). Although past research has examined the efficacy of parenting newsletters in general, other formats of parenting educational materials, such as magazine-style publications, have received less attention.

Present Study

The purpose of the current study was to expand on the limited research evaluating the efficacy of alternative printed parent educational materials. Specifically, this study examined whether a parent resource guide delivered to new mothers at the time of birth would impact their reported understanding and application of information read and their adjustment to parenthood. The following research questions were addressed: (1) How many and which articles do new mothers report reading over time? (2) Will new mothers report that the articles they read helped them understand concepts presented? (3) Will new mothers report applying the information read in caring for their newborn and their families? (4) Will new mothers report the articles read helped them feel more adjusted to the parenting role? and (5) How will new mothers rate the publication when compared to other parent educational resources?

About the *Guide for New Parents*

The Guide for New Parents (GNP) (Futris 2008) is a magazine-style resource guide that provides parents with relevant information applicable to both immediate and future needs related to the care of self and their child, particularly in the first few months following birth. The content in the GNP features research-based information specific to respective Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) Extension program areas, including: infant development, parenting, co-parenting and couple relations, child care, nutrition and health, food safety, housing and environmental safety, and financial management and planning (see Table 1). Each article is a 2-page spread that

reinforces the resources and expertise available at the county level and includes a referral to the FACS Extension website and the local county Extension office.

Table 1. Title and Content of Articles in the Guide for New Parents

Article Title	Focus
What to Expect the First Month	Neonatal period, sleeping, crying, infant development
Nurturing Your Baby's Brain	Brain development, early experiences, parent-infant interaction
Breast-Feeding	Successful breast feeding, self-care while nursing
Successful Bottle-Feeding	Successful bottle feeding, preparation and storage, bonding
Parenting Together	Co-parenting, communication, support, flexibility, respect
A New Set of Family Dynamics	Managing relationships with siblings, partner, in-laws
Daddy Time	Nurturing, bonding, support, balancing work-family
Child Care Quality Matters	How to identify quality child care, choices, finding programs
Putting Baby on a Budget	Assessing spending habits, setting a budget, reducing spending
Paying for Your Child's Education	Saving money, college funds, tips on cutting spending
A Healthy Home for Baby	Environmental toxins (e.g., mold, lead, radon) and allergy triggers
Baby's First Road Trip	Car seat safety, choosing a car seat, installation, position of baby

Method

Between September 1 to December 30, 2008, 24 labor and delivery hospitals within 22 counties across Georgia distributed the GNP during a three month block of time. The GNP was included with materials handed to new mothers by a nurse or educator either during their stays at the

hospital or as mothers left the hospital. To collect initial feedback from the mothers who received the GNP, business reply survey postcards were included in the GNP for mothers to return in exchange for a Baby's First Year Calendar. Follow-up surveys were mailed about 3 months after the birth of their children to mothers who returned a postcard and met the following selection criteria: mothers were age 18 or older, a Georgia resident, and could read English. Dillman's (2007) methods to maximize survey response rates were utilized. Each follow-up survey was accompanied by a cover letter explaining the project and included a calendar and a self-addressed stamped envelope for returning the survey. One week later a postcard reminder went out to those who had not returned a completed survey. Finally, three weeks after the initial surveys were mailed, non-responders were sent a follow-up letter along with another copy of the survey and a self-addressed stamped envelope. As an incentive for completing and returning the survey, participants were entered into a drawing for one of four \$25.00 gift cards.

The survey obtained self-reported information on participant demographics. Also, mothers were asked to report what articles they read, whether those articles helped them understand the concepts presented and whether they applied the information from the article. Mothers were also asked if the information in the articles was useful in helping them adjust to their new role and how the GNP compared to other parenting resources. A more detailed description of the questions focused on in this paper is provided in the results below.

Sample

Based on monthly reports collected from the 24 participating hospitals, 9465 women gave birth during the distribution period and approximately 8600 (91 percent) of these new mothers received a copy of the GNP. As of April 30, 2009, 279 Georgia mothers returned a completed postcard. Most (65 percent) of these mothers were located in one of the counties where the GNP was distributed, where as 35 percent delivered their baby at a participating hospital but resided in a neighboring county. Overall, mothers from 73 counties across Georgia returned a postcard. Also, 44 percent of these mothers returned a postcard the same month they delivered, 34 percent within one month post-delivery, and 22 percent two or more months post-delivery.

Of the 279 mothers, 255 met the selection criteria and were mailed a survey, and 146 returned a completed survey (57 percent response rate). The 146 mothers ranged in age from 18 to 40 years ($M = 26.39$; $SD = 5.75$) and most were Caucasian (66 percent), married (56 percent) and at least high school educated (82 percent). Regarding annual family income, 45 percent of the mothers reported less than \$20,000, 24 percent reported \$20,000-\$39,999, 12 percent reported \$40,000-\$59,999, and 19 percent reported \$60,000 or more. Almost half (47 percent) reported this baby was their first child and 51 percent gave birth to a girl. As seen in Table 2, the general profile of the current sample ($n = 146$) was fairly similar to the profile of mothers who did not return a completed survey ($n = 109$), with two exceptions: the current sample was more likely to be Caucasian ($X^2 = 11.66$, $p = .003$) and married or cohabiting ($X^2 = 14.36$, $p = .001$). Similarly, the

current sample appears similar to mothers across Georgia with exception of race (current sample more likely Caucasian). Likewise, a higher proportion of the 146 mothers were first-time parents and younger. Although a representative proportion of African American mothers are included, it was speculated that the current sample includes a higher proportion of Caucasian mothers mostly because fewer Hispanic or “other” mothers likely read the GNP or completed the postcard since it was only available in English.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of New Mother Respondents

Demographic Characteristics		Returned Postcard (N=279)	Surveyed: Total (n=255)	Surveyed: Did not respond (n=109)	Surveyed: Responded (n=146)	Georgia Mothers^a (N=146,464)
Age	17 or younger	5.5%	N/A	N/A	N/A	3.9%
	18-19	14.4%	14.6%	16.8%	13.0%	8.0%
	20-24	31.5%	33.5%	35.5%	32.2%	26.8%
	25-29	24.6%	25.9%	29.9%	23.3%	27.5%
	30-34	15.9%	17.1%	10.3%	21.9%	20.7%
	35-39	6.5%	7.2%	5.6%	8.2%	10.7%
	40 or older	1.8%	1.6%	1.9%	1.4%	2.3%
Race/ Ethnicity	Caucasian (non-Hispanic)	57.2%	56.7%	44.4%	65.8%	42.0%
	African American	32.7%	33.9%	42.6%	27.4%	32.6%
	Hispanic	6.5%	5.9%	6.5%	5.5%	15.8%
	Other	3.6%	3.5%	5.6%	1.4%	9.6%
Education	Some high school	19.9%	16.8%	14.4%	18.5%	22.8%
	HS diploma/ GED	39.9%	40.8%	46.2%	37.0%	77.2% ^b

	Some college	22.9%	23.6%	26.9%	21.2%	N/A
	College degree	17.7%	18.8%	12.5%	23.3%	N/A
Marital Status	Single	33.7%	31.3%	44.3%	21.9%	45.3% ^c
	Cohabiting	19.2%	19.0%	15.1%	21.9%	N/A
	Married	47.1%	49.6%	40.6%	56.2%	54.7%
First Child	Yes	48.4%	45.5%	43.0%	47.3%	36.6%
Baby's Sex	Girl	50.7%	51.6%	51.9%	51.4%	N/A

Note: Valid percents reported above. N/A = Not applicable or not available

^a Source: 2008 rates from Georgia DHR Division of Public Health (<http://oasis.state.ga.us/>).

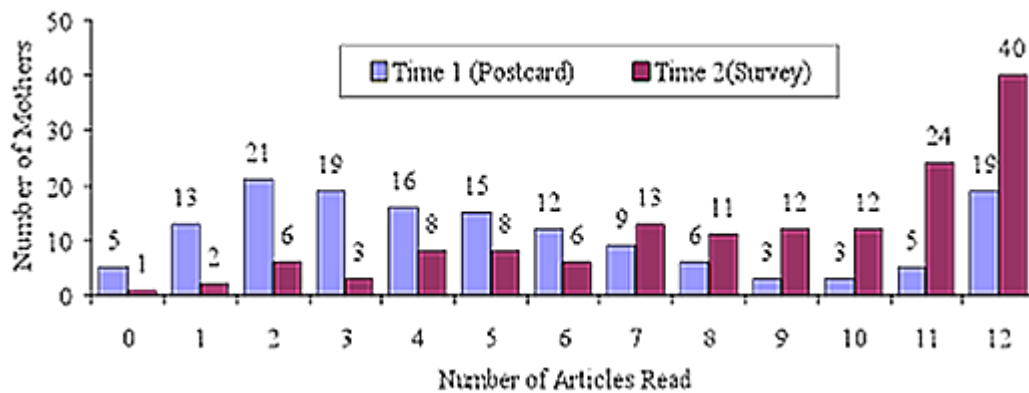
^b Percent with 12 or more years of education.

^c Percent unmarried.

Results

What Mothers Read

To determine how many and which articles mothers reported reading respondents were asked at both Time 1 (T1; postcard) and Time 2 (T2; follow-up survey) to check off each article they had read. As shown in Figure 1, of the 146 mothers who responded, 47 percent reported reading one to four articles at T1 compared to only 13 percent at T2. Likewise, where as only 21 percent of mothers reportedly read nine to 12 articles at T1, 60 percent had done so by T2. Clearly these results reveal the trend of mothers holding on to the GNP and reading more of the articles over time.

Figure 1: Total Number of Articles Read from Time 1 to Time 2 (n=146)

In regards to the specific articles read at T1 and T2, findings further reinforce that these 146 mothers reported reading more articles over time, and reveal a pattern in the type of articles read. As seen in Table 3, nearly all of the mothers reported reading *What to Expect the First Month* at T1 (84 percent) and T2 (93 percent). Other articles that were prominently read by nearly half of the mothers at T1 also focused on “immediate” need, covering topics such as breast and bottle feeding (65 percent and 43 percent, respectively), infant brain development (52 percent) and coparenting (48 percent). By T2, a higher proportion of mothers had read these articles as well as the other articles in the GNP. These findings may support the connotation that mothers may have perceived the other articles as containing information that was more relevant as their baby grew older (e.g., negotiating familial relationships, child care, maintaining a healthy home, paying for their baby’s future education).

Table 3. Mothers’ Reports on Reading, Understanding and Applying the Information in each Article

Article	Read Time 1 (n, percent)	Read Time 2 (n, percent)	Helped “A Little”(percent)	Helped “A Lot” (percent)	Applied information (percent)
What to Expect the First Month	123 (84.2)	136 (93.2)	37.0	60.7	88.9
Nurturing Your Baby’s Brain	76 (52.1)	110 (75.3)	33.6	63.6	92.7

Breast-Feeding	95 (65.1)	95 (65.1)	37.9	48.4	71.3
Successful Bottle-Feeding	62 (42.5)	120 (82.2)	21.7	75.0	92.4
Parenting Together	70 (47.9)	116 (79.5)	31.9	58.6	74.8
A New Set of Family Dynamics	37 (25.3)	108 (74.0)	35.2	58.3	81.1
Daddy Time	66 (45.2)	108 (74.0)	23.1	72.2	86.9
Child Care Quality Matters	42 (28.8)	87 (59.6)	23.0	74.7	68.2
Putting Baby on a Budget	48 (32.9)	92 (63.0)	37.0	62.0	86.8
Paying for Your Child's Education	40 (27.4)	81 (55.5)	29.6	61.7	67.5
A Healthy Home for Baby	64 (43.8)	120 (82.2)	22.5	73.3	91.6
Baby's First Road Trip	51 (34.9)	109 (74.7)	22.9	72.5	94.4

What Mothers Understood and Applied

For each article reportedly read at T2, mothers were then asked whether the article read helped them better understand that topic “a lot,” “a little,” “not much” or “not at all.” As shown in Table 3, nearly all of the mothers (81-99 percent) reported that each article read helped them to better understand the topics they read “a lot” or “a little.” As shared by one mother, “*This book was very helpful. I learned things that I didn't know. It also helped my husband also.*”

Next, mothers were asked to check “yes” or “no” as to whether they used or applied the information read for each article. As seen in Table 3, at least two-thirds of the mothers reported

applying the information read and most (89-94 percent) reported they applied information from 8 of the 12 articles read. When asked what was most helpful, one mother wrote: *“The info about breast feeding. I almost didn't do it because I was overwhelmed, tired, and in pain. I am so glad that I read the article because it encouraged me to give my baby the BEST.”*

Adjustment to Parenting Role

Mothers were asked whether the articles read, overall, helped them feel prepared to take care of their baby “a lot,” “a little,” “not much,” or “not at all.” Of the 146 mothers, 135 mothers replied and 69 and 29 percent reported it helped “a lot” or “a little,” respectively. According to one mother, *“It really helped me and my partner out. It let us relax more and know that we can be great parents.”* Mothers also rated how useful the GNP was in helping them to adjust to the parenting role (1 = “not at all useful” to 10 = “extremely useful”). Of the 142 mothers who replied, responses ranged from 3 to 10 and the majority (n=93, 66 percent) rated the GNP as highly useful (score of 8-10) and 44 (31 percent) rated it as moderately useful (score of 5-7). One mother commented, *“I really enjoyed and learned a lot from “Daddy Time”, loved it. Parenting Together article is very important to me, cause I want my husband and I both to help each other with all the daily/needs of our new baby and adjusting our oldest son to having a baby brother in ‘his’ house with his ‘mama’ and ‘daddy’.”*

Rating of the Guide for New Parents

To examine the last research question, mothers were asked to rate the GNP on its readability as well as its usefulness compared to other parenting resources. First, mothers were asked to report how easy the articles were to understand and most (90 percent) of the 146 respondents reported they were “very easy” to understand. As illustrated in one mother’s comment, *“The articles were very informative. Not complex articles to read. Simple and straight to the point.”* As well, mothers were asked how the GNP compared to other parent education resources they had received. As shown in Table 4, the majority of mothers found the information in the articles “about the same” or “more useful” when compared to other parent education sources. Of note here is that 41-48 percent of respondents felt the GNP was more useful than information from healthcare professionals, childcare providers, or advice from their partner, baby’s grandparents or other parents and peers. One mother stated, *“You were very thorough in your articles and touched on some topics that weren't covered by others. I appreciate the extent you took to talk about certain topics and keep my attention. It did cover some things that I hadn't thought of or had some questions about. I really liked the article about dealing with the in-laws (overbearing mother in law).”*

Table 4. Mothers' Reports on Usefulness of GNP Compared to Other Resources

Other parenting resources	n	Less useful	About the same	More useful
Hospital materials received	126	12 (9.5)	81 (64.3)	33 (26.2)
Parenting books	114	7 (6.1)	66 (57.9)	41 (36.0)
Parenting magazines	122	10 (8.2)	71 (58.2)	41 (33.6)
Parenting classes	48	10 (20.8)	20 (41.7)	18 (37.5)
Parenting newsletters	78	14 (17.9)	39 (50.0)	25 (32.1)
Parenting websites	89	12 (13.5)	53 (59.6)	24 (27.0)
Parenting advice from health care professionals	122	14 (11.5)	57 (46.7)	51 (41.8)
Parenting advice from child care providers	81	8 (9.9)	39 (48.1)	34 (42.0)
Parenting advice from spouse/ partner/ baby's father	98	17 (17.3)	34 (34.7)	47 (48.0)
Parenting advice from baby's grandparents	117	21 (17.9)	46 (39.3)	50 (42.7)
Parenting advice from other parents, peers, or friends	114	10 (8.8)	52 (45.6)	52 (45.6)

^a n-size varies depending on whether mothers reported using the listed resource for parenting support.

Discussion

Based on a convenient yet representative sample of new mothers across the state, these results suggest that mothers not only read the *Guide for New Parents* (GNP) but also learned something from it, applied the information read, and felt it helped them adjust to their parental role. First, the majority of mothers reported that the GNP was easy to understand and they reported reading more of the articles by the time they were surveyed compared to when they first mailed back their postcard. This finding supports the work of Garton et al. (2003) showing that parents will read a publication that is well-written and focused on specific content (i.e., the birth of a child) and often report that the information can make a difference in their lives. Additionally, the

continued increase in readership may represent an artifact of having the GNP in their possession longer affording more time to review the articles, but it may also have been because parents found they needed more information as their infant grew and their family began to evolve, as illustrated in this mother's comment on her postcard (T1): *"As a first time mom and dad, the articles most useful right out of the gate were those I read. You'll notice I didn't read some of them that seemed too far off in future. Baby is not mobile, so health and safety in home were not priority. Baby is hardly here, so higher education seemed not a priority. She's 6 weeks now, and now would be the time to get ready to read those articles."*

Because parents often rely on printed materials to enhance their knowledge and skills to become successful in the parenting role (Bogenschneider and Stone 1997; Dickinson and Cudaback 1992; Riley et al. 1991), parent educational materials such as the GNP delivered at a "teachable moment" containing information pertinent to the age of the child may help parents adjust to this transition. When asked if the articles they read helped them understand concepts presented, one mother commented *"...The articles on child development were extremely helpful as they provided a detailed, but quickly read synopsis on the various stages and expectations for child growth. Also, I thought the articles that involved father involvement were particularly useful."* Likewise, a significant proportion of the mothers in this study, after reading the GNP, reported positive changes in applying information from the topics read as illustrated in this mother's comment when asked what she found most useful: *"I loved the safety first- it helped me figure out I had the car seat in wrong!"* Another mother shared *"The article about paying for baby's future education motivated me to open an account for baby and make monthly deposits into it. The table showing examples of college funds was very helpful - I hadn't seen that in other magazines."*

These findings suggest that the delivery of printed educational materials such as the GNP at the time of birth is both useful and effective. Consistent with prior studies (Weigel and Martin 1996 and 2004) our findings show that parents rate these materials positively on ease of understanding and usefulness and prefer them over other resources. Mothers who read the publication reported that it helped them feel more prepared for the parenting role and also reported retaining it for future use or sharing it with family and friends instead of discarding it. This was illustrated in one mother's comment, *"Thank you for the great information. I passed it all on to a friend who is expecting a baby in August!"*

In sum, with continued budget cuts, face-to-face parent education programming is not always feasible. These results suggest that the GNP may serve as a practical, inexpensive, and efficient educational resource that can provide families with reliable, research-based parenting and child development information they can use immediately. Also, distributing printed educational materials such as this to a targeted audience with specific needs may not only help them meet those needs, but also become familiar with Cooperative Extensions' capacity to meet their and

their family's future needs (Futris and Stone in press). As one new mother wrote on her postcard, "My mom got info from you 30 years ago and is the one who told me to read this. She read the whole thing." It is possible that early exposure to such low-cost and high quality printed materials may encourage mothers to seek out additional resources from Cooperative Extension. Research is needed that examines the efficacy of other low-cost educational delivery approaches, such as social media (see Kinsey 2010), that further engage and sustain parents' involvement in Cooperative Extension, and specifically parenting education, programming.

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