

Opening Doors With the ParentChild+ Program

Using the Power of Relationship to Change Lives

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Abstract

The ParentChild+ Program was created more than 50 years ago and has provided thousands of at-risk families across America with positive outcomes. Originally known as the Mother-Child Home Program and later, Parent-Child Home Program, the model is home visiting, reaching families affected by poverty and societal hardships. This article describes how the program supports and empowers parents of young children as their children's first and most important teacher in the context of today's increasing social isolation of families with young children.

In every era of American history, families have faced challenges in one form or another. What might have been a societal challenge in the 1850s was not a challenge in the 1950s. Each century brings new problems and different stressors. Today, in 2019, families are more socially isolated from their extended families than in previous generations. What happens when there is no extended family available? Perhaps a woman is on her own due to domestic abuse and violence. She may bring that baby home to a shelter, where strangers look at her with suspicious eyes and the presence of a guard at the front gate makes her think that she already failed in life just by living there. What if a couple has left family in a faraway country due to hunger, fear of the government, or violence in the streets? They must parent on their own.

One thing that never changes is that people need people to survive. What is clear and constant is that families need support. Mothers and fathers need to learn how to parent, and they need the help of others. Babies need their parents present and in love with them: responding, attentive, available, and interacting. Parents also need others in the family and the community to provide the security and framework around them to give them

the rest, the courage and the ability to do the same for their child. Human connection is essential.

Once, communities were more open and neighbors helped neighbors with every kind of support. Families of several generations lived together or nearby, and child-rearing was the job of everyone. Most front doors were kept unlocked and open. But in the 21st century, even in a small town, society has become more private, less communicative, more guarded. Lack of stable, affordable housing, food insecurity, the rising cost of living, and dwindling community resources add to financial strains and undermine the base of family security.

The Science of Child Development

Through decades of research and investigation, education and science have made incredible strides in understanding what is needed in the early years of human development. In 2017, the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University published *Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families* in an effort to drive science-based innovation into practice that achieves breakthrough outcomes for children facing adversity. To be maximally effective, policies and services should:

1. Support responsive relationships for children and adults.
2. Strengthen core life skills.

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3. Reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2017, p. 1).

These principles are described in detail in the following pages, with examples of how the ParentChild+ Program strives to implement these three elements in its approach to working with young children and their families.

Supportive Responsive Relationships

Scientists have discovered that the experiences children have early in life, in association with their environments, not only shape brain architecture, but set the stage for future development. Stable and positive responsive relationships, especially in the form of supportive parents, can protect children in the earliest years of life from the harm that excessive stress can cause. Trauma and stress distract from and delete what human children need to grow and thrive. Humans are wired to be social creatures. The human brain is a mirroring organ. People learn and our brains grow when we watch and read someone else. Brain potential is there at birth but simply put, it is “use it or lose it” over the next few years. Early experiences set the foundation for all future development. Relationships help build resilience across childhood and into adulthood.

Strengthen Core Capacities

Core capabilities or life skills are needed to manage life, work, and relationships successfully. These capabilities support the ability to focus and to plan for and achieve goals. People must learn self-control and must be aware of and able to adapt to changing situations in life. Children are not born with these skills and need to develop them through modeling and practice—one step at a time. Learning starts at home within the family. Foundations of resilience can be formed in young children through supportive relationships and building these adaptive skills.

Reduce Stress

Stress from society can become toxic and unremitting in response to hardships such as deep poverty, community violence, neighborhood segregation, abuse and separation of families, mistrust, lack of housing, mental illness, food insecurity, and so on. When toxic stress develops in an environment without responsive, caring relationships, it disrupts the process of development, with lifelong consequences for learning, behavior, and health. Reducing the stressors or adding supports during these hindrances can alleviate negative outcomes.

The Current Social Context

According to the Annie E. Casey Kids Count Data Center (2018), more than 14,116,000 children are living in poverty in the US. In February 2019, 1,355,821 children were verified in



Photo: Dianne Nilan

ParentChild+ is an early literacy, school readiness, parent support, home visiting program for low-income families with young children.

American schools as being homeless in 2016–17 (National Center Homeless Education, 2019) and the U.S. Department of Education stated 1,260,254 homeless children were younger than 6 years old (including babies and toddlers; Yamashiro, Yan, & McLaughlin, 2018). In addition, millions of uncounted immigrant children are living in cities and rural communities without basic needs met. In view of these figures, child well-being should be put at the forefront of policies and practices that affect families and children.

The ParentChild+ Program

The Mother-Child Home Program, renamed in April 2019 as ParentChild+, was created by Phyllis Levenstein in 1965 in Freeport, New York. Today the program continues to expand with 123 sites in 15 states and in five other nations. The way that ParentChild+ has been implemented in diverse communities across the US over the decades, and now in other countries, strives to align with the three Principles identified in the Harvard report (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2017). ParentChild+ is an early literacy, school readiness, parent support, home visiting program for low-income families with young children. Over the years, ParentChild+ has been making a difference, providing reliable and consistent help to families with young children living in adversity. Parents in this program are encouraged to be responsive to their children, to learn and teach core life skills, and, as a result, reduce their children’s life stress. This is accomplished one person to another, one home visit at a time. Supportive guidance is offered to parents despite turmoil, societal stress, and multiple challenges. The program trains, supports, and encourages visitors to make a difference, then sends them out to knock on doors, even in difficult and challenging circumstances.

Photo: Diane Nilan



Each week the early learning specialist arrives and brings the new book or toy and helps the parent show the child how to look at that book or play with the toy.

Program Approach

The ParentChild+ Program is implemented through a social service agency, family resource center, school, library, or faith-based organization with a vision to bring this purpose to community members, within the training and direction of the ParentChild+ National Center. Coordinator and early learning specialists (ELSs) are hired locally and receive training on a three-pronged curriculum: Verbal Interaction Techniques, Positive Parenting Behavior, and Fostering the Child's Social-Emotional Competence (Levenstein, 1988).

To initiate program services with parents, the coordinator first meets the family (when the child is 16 months to 4 years old); the family may have heard about the program through outreach efforts or word of mouth. The coordinator then matches an ELS with the family. Home visits begin and consist of 30 minutes, twice a week. The ELS provides brand new educational toys and age-appropriate books as gifts for the families to keep. The same ELS meets with the family for 2 years, a total of 92 visits. The job of the ELS is to coach, model, and help parents practice how to read and play with their children to strengthen the parent-child relationship. The program is voluntary and free for the families, and it respects the dignity, independence, and right to privacy of all parents. It is non-intrusive and requires no mandatory tasks or requirements of parents except to be there for each visit: physically, mentally and socially. Parent engagement may happen in stages as the parent begins to trust the visitor through consistent contact each week (Levenstein & Levenstein, 2008).

ELSs are trained, supported, and heard by their coordinator, whom they always have access to while working. Weekly mandatory staff meetings provide additional opportunities for supervision. Coordinators address challenges and issues in a supportive manner, and it is essential that the supporting agency and administration understand how interpersonal support and reflective supervision are key to program success.

Support Responsive Relationships for Children and Adults

Each week, the ELS arrives and brings the new book or toy and helps the parent show the child how to look at that book or play with the toy. No didactic teaching is involved. The program is a light touch. There is no right or wrong way to play! Together they explore and have fun. No requirements are put on the parent except to use that book or toy more during the week. The gifts are called Verbal Interaction Stimulus Materials. Their purpose is to stimulate words and conversations as materials are explored together. Soon the child begins to talk more, and in this program the parent feels directly responsible for the success. Soon the young child learns that a new toy or book is coming each week! They get excited and happy for the visit. Parents enjoy their child's happiness and are empowered in their role. They feel accepted by the home visitor's warmth, and these relationships grow stronger.

The program respects the family's cultural and linguistic differences. The program respects each parent as their child's first and most important teacher. More than 40 years ago Urie Bronfenbrenner, developmental psychologist, made this statement about ParentChild+ Program's approach to supporting parents:

It is in the social sphere that Levenstein's method is most distinctive. The principle and direct agent of intervention becomes not the teacher, or the tutor, but the mother. As a result, intervention does not terminate at the end of the program, but continues as long as the patterns of joint activity and interaction between mother and child endure. (Bronfenbrenner, 1974 p. 26)

ELSs on the ParentChild+ team are trained to take a back seat in the home visit as early as possible and to enable the parent to lead the interactions with their own child. When this program is implemented in a homeless shelter, it bridges the gaps and barriers families often experience due to lack of transportation or limited access to center-based early childhood education. With flexibility, creativity, and human ingenuity, the program can happen anywhere: in a shelter bedroom, on the back porch, in a basement or yard, at a campground, or even in a car. It just takes a bit of time in a somewhat quiet space for the visitor to help the parent and child come together and have some fun. When the same person follows them to visit wherever they live for 2 years, they become familiar—like a neighbor.

Significantly, Levenstein said,

The program's assumption was that its role in fostering the parent-child network was also supportive of [the] mother's development. The program could serve as a vehicle for improving the mental health of the mother and indeed the whole family through the mother's improved self-confidence. At the same time, it was hoped that fostering the frequent happy connections between mother and child, in two of the child's most formative years, would have a good mental effect on the child. It could aid the child to develop into a happy, sociable human being, a little reader to meet the challenges of school and life. Ultimately, it was

hoped that mother's pride in their visible accomplishments with their children would raise their own self-esteem and ability to cope with the everyday world. (Levenstein, 1988, pp. 45–47)

The program also recognizes the powerful role that fathers play in the lives of their children, and ELSs also support fathers in the home visits within the context of empowering the whole family.

Strengthen Core Life Skills

The repeated routine of regular sessions at a specific time helps parents and children learn through repetition. The ELS encourages self-control through the practice of waiting, listening, and give-and-take during play. They teach the importance of caring for books and toys. Through play, children are also learning concrete skills about words, numbers, and early education concepts. A subject randomized controlled trial in Pittsfield, MA, found that children who have experienced 2 years of the ParentChild+ Program stay in school and graduate from high school at a 30% rate higher than other low-income students (Levenstein, Levenstein, Shiminski, & Stolzberg, 1998). Research suggests that it is not the amount of words spoken but the amount of conversational *turns* between a parent and child that stimulate the brain (Romeo et al., 2018). It is the number of interpersonal give-and-take (also called “serve and return” interactions) that matters. ELSs help foster conversational turns as parents become more skilled with listening and responding to children.

Reduce Sources of Stress in the Lives of Children and Families

Some of the stress the parent feels is alleviated by the consistent and non-judgmental presence of the ELS. The ELS follows the idiom that “how you are is more important than what you do.” Listening to the parents’ narratives of what they are going through helps alleviate their stress despite the problems they are facing.

When families have to move due to home displacement or shelter changes, the coordinator takes the initiative to find them. It is her responsibility to keep track of the family because families often lack phone access or other ways to stay connected. She models what is expected in ongoing relationships and appointments. She shows up at the new door. One mom said, “She actually took the time and effort to find me. I guess she is still going to come even if it’s 30 miles away.”

ELs connect families and navigate steps to services and concrete resources provided from the local community (e.g., new food sources, libraries, school programs). When their ELS *keeps coming*, parents are often amazed that the ELS took the time to find them and to stay connected. A parent might think “Maybe things *will* be all right! My child waits at the window for her to come, and he brightens as he sees her. He begs me to sit down, so I do, and my worries are forgotten for a little while. The ELS says she will come for 2 years. Is it possible? Well, maybe I can do this after all.”



Photo: Diane Nilan

Through play, children are learning concrete skills about words, numbers, and early education concepts.

The program is strength-based, and the ELS will verbally acknowledge the parent’s strengths. In the midst of losses and failures, the parent and child can see they are doing many things well! Sometimes a success can be found in an activity or a game. For example, musical instruments bring a chance to sing, dance, and lighten the atmosphere and environment. In one instance, a father who usually took a back seat became engaged in the visit because of the music. He grabbed a tambourine and began to keep the beat, and everyone sang and sang and felt joy even inside a dreary shelter room. In another family, there was a young father who often played video games in a dark room at the shelter where they met for the home visit. One day the ELS brought art materials, papers, pens, and crayons. The dad turned on the light, sat on the floor, and began to draw. He was an artist but had no materials. His boys were thrilled to scribble with him, and from then on, the light was always on in the room when the ELS arrived and dad was ready to have fun and participate with his family. Over time, strengths were unveiled despite the stigma of failure in a

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Preparing the Youngest Children for School Success: The Parent–Child Home Program
S. Benjamin (2010)
ZERO TO THREE Journal, 30(3), 34–38

Photo: Diane Nilan



Finding strengths even in adversity gave the courage and motivation to succeed.

homeless shelter. Finding strengths even in adversity gave the courage and motivation to succeed.

One mom could not read so she memorized a book by the pictures with her son. He loved that book so very much because they had it and used it together. When he went to kindergarten in a strange new town, the teacher had that book and he “read” (recited) it to the whole class by memory. He was so proud. It empowered him to begin to excel in school where he had previously been afraid.

Conclusion

The power of ParentChild+ is in building stronger relationships. Poverty is often seen as the extent to which an individual lacks financial and concrete resources to adequately meet needs. However, poverty can also be a loss of human capital, a poverty of relationships. Parents are often alone when doing the hardest job they will ever do: raising children. Families experience isolation from traditional family supports due to homelessness or immigration, frequent relocation to new neighborhoods, the loss of access to schools and community supports. ParentChild+ gives the books, toys, materials, and the relationships that help enable parents to be their children’s first teachers. The most important thing offered is an interested other: someone who encourages, supports, empowers—someone who walks alongside a parent. Two times a week for 2 years, a relationship is offered that affirms to parents that they are not alone in a stressful world. Yes, those visitors need to be consistent, flexible, adaptable, and able to recognize good in the midst of bad situations. They need to be authentic, independent, accountable, yet also team-oriented. To match these needs, the ELSs are great listeners; they are positive people with the courage to cross many miles and show up. They are a model of resilience.

One mother said,

You never gave up on me. This program doesn’t just provide education but also a sense of security in an overwhelming and unbalanced time in our lives. The visitor was a familiar face that didn’t change. The benefits and positive results were more than anyone could have imagined.

Another said,

I know you have affected my family in a great way. The fact that you gave 2 seconds of your time to listen to us meant a lot to me. I was able to learn through my daughters. The books and toys are not just books and toys. They were outlets for us to believe that for 1 hour of the day we could escape our sadness and focus on learning. We were learning to believe in ourselves just the same as you came to teach our children to believe in a whole new world of reading and exploring. The program shows us how to show our children something we forgot we had ourselves—believing in the joy of hope!

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the following people:

Sarah E. Walzer, JD, CEO, ParentChild+, Mineola, NY. Thank you for her review of this paper and her ongoing support for young children and their families in the US and across the globe. Thank you also for sharing photos of families the author has served.

Diane Nilan, president, Hear Us, Inc., Naperville, IL. Thank you for sharing photos of families that the author has served and for educating the world, giving voice and visibility to the plight of homeless families and children in America.

Professor Margaret E. Altizer, Department of Humanities, Suffolk County Community College, Riverhead, NY. Thank you for reviewing this article and helping the sentences become more readable so the word can get out.

Susanne Agnello-Sylvester, instructional support specialist, Eastern Suffolk BOCES, Westhampton Beach Learning Center, Westhampton Beach, NY. Thank you for teaching me about PCHP and mentoring me across the decades of service and for also helping my words to make sense.

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Nomads, to raise awareness of the plight of early childhood homelessness in America. Sarah was awarded Educator of the Year by the local *Suffolk Times* newspaper in 2017.

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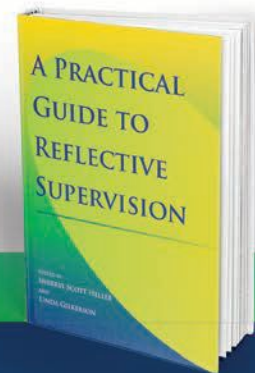
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