

# Professional Pages

## Great First Sessions: Ideas for Increasing Participant Retention in Parent Education Programs

By Nancy Olsen-Harbich and Eliza Cook

Many factors influence participant retention in a parenting education class—from a parent educator’s experience and charisma to the classroom environment—participants assess these factors to determine if they would like to return for additional sessions.

After analyzing retention rates in various counties across New York State between 2013 and 2014, we found that parenting programs in Suffolk County retained 93% of their participants between the first and last session. Based on these exceptional retention rates, we asked Nancy Olsen-Harbich, Program Director of the Family Health and Wellness Area in Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) of Suffolk County, to share a few key factors that she believes are central to increasing retention rates. Though her recommendations are not based on research, they are distilled from years of experience in parenting education. We feel these tips will be useful for parent educators who are attempting to increase their own participant retention rates.

### **KEY #1: Prepare for success before the program starts**

There are many aspects that can be organized well before your program starts. The more you can prepare before participants walk through the front door, the better!

- **Know your target audience.** Do you have any information about who will be attending your parenting class before it starts? Are your participants fathers, grandparents, or teenage parents? How many children do they have and what ages are their children? Any information you can find out about your target audience *before* they attend a parenting class will be helpful to you in making small adjustments during your class to help your participants feel more comfortable. One way to get this information is to set up a formal registration process, so that parent educators can get a sense of the participant demographics prior to the class. You can also use the contact information collected at registration to send participants reminder emails or phone calls.
- **Know your curriculum.** As professional educators, parent educators will be very familiar with the content before they teach it. Preparation for teaching includes studying the material, having a teaching outline, being comfortable with the activities in the lessons, and having clear goals for the class. In addition, background knowledge in child development is always beneficial because it is common for questions to arise that are not a part of the planned curriculum. If a parent educator feels uncertain about their level of knowledge regarding a particular child development topic that will be referenced during a class, the

educator could review the topic prior to the class to be prepared for questions that may arise.

- **Work with your host.** To avoid any last minute surprises with the community site, assign one point-person to work with the host community site. Ask details about the site and even go visit it before the class if possible. Become familiar with the site and know who to contact if issues arise during your class.

## **KEY #2: Create a welcoming environment**

The room, seating arrangements, refreshments, noise, and temperature all matter to participant comfort and retention. Uncomfortable people do not have a good experience and may not eagerly return for another session.

- **Assess and improve the physical environment.** Prior to the first class, visit the site and make adjustments to improve the environment. Consider how you will arrange the seats, test out the markers or other equipment you plan to use, adjust the temperature if it is uncomfortable, and turn off any appliances in the room that make distracting noises.
- **Pick a location that feels safe.** It is very important that participants feel safe, or else they will be less likely to open up and participate fully in sessions. Do everything possible to hold sessions in locations where participant safety is a priority—this includes the parking lot too! If you have any concerns, it is best to move the class to a new location. If that is not possible, provide extra safety measures for your participants, such as walking participants to their car after the class.
- **Consider first impressions.** One helpful way to know what adjustments to make to create a welcoming environment is to visualize how participants will experience the site for the first time. Is parking easily accessible? Can the room be easily found? Are the participants greeted warmly when they get there (if you are too busy fussing with the coffee pot to greet the class participants, they may not feel welcome)? These small impressions create the type of environment that will affect participants' experiences.

## **KEY #3: Orientation**

Set the stage and be upfront about what your journey together will be like during the parenting classes.

- **Overview roles—both for the parent educator and the participant.** Be clear about what you expect of the participants and also ask them what they expect of you, of the class, and of each other. Some examples include arriving on time, ending on time, respect for differences of opinions, and completing any homework between sessions.

- **Communicate the importance of attending all sessions.** Some participants may be unaware that each class offers new material that builds on the previous class, so it is vital to attend all classes. Find ways to communicate this idea many times throughout the classes. For example, if a parent asks a question you might respond, *“That’s a topic lots of parents struggle with, I’ll briefly answer your question now and next class we’ll be honing in our discussion on that topic for a while...”* or *“Bedtime is hard for many families...Between our 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> sessions, I’ll be asking you to practice some new ways to make family routines less stressful”*. This helps participants understand the importance of attending all sessions and to anticipate the material in the upcoming sessions.
- **Guided tour.** One important part of orientation is ensuring that all participants know their way around the site. Point out the location of bathrooms, drinking fountains, break areas, and where they can go if an emergency arises.

#### **KEY #4: A parent educator that is both warm and skilled**

It’s no secret that a parent educator has a major impact on participant retention. Parent educators set the stage for how the content will be delivered, how parents will participate during the sessions, and impact how comfortable parents feel during classes.

- **Characteristics of a good parent educator.** Every parent educator differs in their own unique skills and ways of teaching. However, high quality parent educators share most or all of these characteristics: friendly, non-judgmental, organized, confident, sense of humor, empathetic, and engaging. Without a quality parent educator it is very difficult for participants to feel comfortable and learn effectively.
- **Parent educators understand and respect how adults learn.** Another important trait of parent educators is to be skilled in facilitating adult group learning. These skills include knowing the importance of building rapport within the group, creating a safe and respectful learning environment, communicating with respect, and utilizing various learning activities that engage all participants.

#### **KEY #5: A good curriculum**

In addition to a quality parent educator, it is also just as important to utilize a quality curriculum in your parenting education classes.

- **Content.** The content of the curriculum will be most effective when it is research based, meets the needs of participants, and has a good pace. In addition to knowing the course content, highly skilled parent educators also know how your curriculum was created, if it is up to date, who the target audience is, and what outcomes are associated with the program. It is important to make sure that the curriculum you have chosen aligns with the goals you have for your participants.

- **Parent educators feel comfortable facilitating the curriculum.** After you have a curriculum that works for your participants, the next step is to ensure that the parent educator is comfortable facilitating it. Every facilitator is different, and parent educators should not use any methods that feel uncomfortable. If you do not care for technology, don't use it! Make changes to activities that suit the group and your comfort level as a presenter. At the same time, if you do make adjustments, make sure that the content is still preserved and delivered to the participants.

## **KEY #6: Leave time to formally end the session**

Time is limited during a parenting education class, but it is vital to adjust your pace to allow for a formal ending at the close of a class. This helps participants realize all that they have learned during that class, renew their personal goals for the week, and look forward to the next class.

- **Summary of today's class.** At the end of every session be sure to summarize what was covered. This helps reinforce the lessons learned and helps showcase the value of the session. If possible, make the summary personal by tying in ideas or discoveries that participants came up with during the session.
- **Expectations for next class.** Next, remind participants of ideas that came up during the class that they might want to try at home. This can be formalized into a homework assignment or you can communicate this less formally if you feel the participants will respond better that way. Be sure to also let participants know that there will be time to report on their homework assignment in the next meeting in the event they would like to share. By asking your participants to share in reporting their homework, it communicates your assumption that they will return. You can also cover any other expectations you have for next time such as being on time, etc.
- **End with a genuine expression of your feelings about the session.** Every class is different so try to end with a sincere expression that was specific to the class. You may want to comment on how you appreciated how many examples the participants shared from their personal lives, or how the participants jumped in to participate in activities, or how you enjoyed the humor the participants brought to the class. Communicate how much you have enjoyed your time together and how much you look forward to being together in the next class.

There is no perfect recipe for increasing retention rates in a parenting education class. Some strategies may work for some educators or counties, while others may not. However, we encourage parent educators to consider the recommendations covered in this document as positive examples and suggestions for retaining participants in parenting classes.

**Visit the *Parenting in Context* project at:**

<http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/>

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