

Professional Pages

Offering Parenting Education Programs in Your County

By Eliza Lathrop Cook and Kimberly Kopko

The Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) system offers a myriad of pertinent, useful parenting classes to community members across New York State. Approximately 40 counties across New York currently offer parenting education programs, and many other counties are interested in learning how to offer parenting education programs in their communities. There are many considerations, from choosing a curriculum, staffing, and funding the program. The goal of this Professional Page is to overview six key steps to consider as you prepare to offer parenting education in your county for the first time.

STEP #1: Assess the needs of the parents in your community

The curriculum, potential funding sources, the participants you recruit—all depend on the needs in your community—so it is essential to clearly assess the needs in your community.

- **If you are unsure the needs of parents in your community: Ask.** There are many ways to get more information about the needs of parents in your community. In the past, counties across New York State have created and disseminated online surveys to parents to learn more about parents' needs. Another tactic is to reach out to experts in your community (e.g., school officials, health providers, community leaders, social workers, etc.) and ask them what they believe to be the most critical needs of parents in your community. These experts often see challenges that parents and families encounter and can offer guidance on programming to best suit the needs of families. It is also important to consider your own reasons for offering parenting programming in your community. Often, new programming is prompted by such occurrences as acquiring new funding, community concerns about a particular group or topic, or interest from parents. It is therefore important to examine your own circumstances and reasons for offering a program as this can be a great starting point to guide your efforts.
- **Consider your target group in your community.** Many parenting education programs are targeted for a particular developmental age group (e.g., parents of toddlers, parents of teenagers, etc.). Therefore, one important consideration is to decide if there is a specific group of parents that you would like to target in your parenting program, or if you prefer to keep your classes more general to include parents of children of all ages.
- **Consider specific needs of parents in your community.** Some counties are interested in offering general parenting education programs that can apply to a broad range of needs, while other counties have specific needs in mind. For example, *Parenting A Second Time Around (PASTA)* is a program for grandparents

who are primary caregivers of their grandchildren. Additionally, the *Parents Apart Program* began in Tompkins County when court officials voiced the need for additional support for families in the process of a divorce or separation. Therefore, an important consideration is whether you would like to address general parenting needs or whether there are specific needs in your community that could benefit from parenting education.

STEP #2: Pick a program

Once you've assessed the needs of parents in your community, the next step is to pick a curriculum. Picking a curriculum that fits the needs of the parents who will attend your class is essential to your success.

- **General parenting programs vs. Specific parenting programs.** Based on your assessment of the needs of parents in your community, the next decision is whether you want to offer a general parenting program or a specific parenting program. This decision will limit what parenting programs are available to meet your needs. Browsing through various programs and curricula can help narrow your search to a program that meets your interests and needs.
- **Evidence-based programs vs. Research-based programs.** Another important consideration is whether to offer an evidence-based program or a research-based parenting program. Evidence-based programs have been tested with research designs (using control and treatment groups) to determine if there are causal outcomes among parents who participated in the program. For example, the *Strengthening Families Program: For Parents and Youth 10-14*, is an evidence-based program found to significantly reduce problem behaviors, delinquency, and alcohol and drug use in children. Research-based programs on the other hand, are developed based on current research findings and are typically evaluated with pre- and post-surveys. Whereas positive results from evidence-based programs can be attributed as a direct result of participation in the program, these same causal connections cannot be made of positive results from evaluations of research-based programs. In other words, evaluations cannot “prove” that positive results are caused by participation in the program. Because of the rigor of evidence-based programs, funders often prefer these programs as outcomes linked to the program are more likely to be achieved. However, evidence-based programs may not address all parenting education needs as these programs tend to focus on a particular topic or target audience, generally require additional training and fees to cover the cost of curriculum, and they must be implemented with fidelity and rigor.
- **Consider funding sources.** Many counties receive funding to offer programming to address a specific community need. If this is the case, selecting a program based on the funding source and community need may be a relatively easy decision. If, however, you are not constrained by a funding source seeking a specific need, you

can pursue a number of funding options (see Step #4 for more details). In either circumstance, having open communication with your funders early on in the process can help facilitate selection of the best program.

- **Consider staffing and training.** When choosing a parenting program it is helpful to consider how many parent educators you will need and the unique skills and experience of each parent educator. For example, if you know that a parent educator who will be teaching the course has ample experience teaching parents of youth, you may consider choosing a curriculum that she would be most comfortable teaching, such as a program for parents of teens. In addition, if you know that you will only have one parent educator available, this may impact which class you choose, depending on the number of sessions, length of classes, and number of staff required to implement the program.
- **Not sure where to start to find a list of potential programs?** On the Parenting In Context website, you can search the section entitled “Programs”. Listed here are various popular programs used across New York State, and you can click on each program for a more detailed description. Some programs provide links to the curriculum, where you can view and download the curriculum content and get a comprehensive feel of whether a certain program will be a good fit in your county. There is also a contact person listed for each program; if you have more specific questions you can contact that person directly.
- **What if I’m interested in a program that is not on the list?** If there is a specific program you would like to offer, but it is not on the website list, you may want to contact the program developer to learn more about how and why the program was developed, the target population, outcomes associated with the program, whether the program is evidence-based, cost associated with training and implementing the program, and who is currently using the program. By learning more about the program and reaching out to those currently using the program, you will be more likely to gauge whether the program will be a good fit for the parents and families in your county. If you still have questions regarding program selection please contact Eliza Cook, Extension Support Specialist, at elc96@cornell.edu.

STEP #3: Develop an evaluation plan

Once you have chosen your curriculum, it is important to develop a way to evaluate the program. Collecting and evaluating data is an essential component to offering a parenting program because you can use evaluations to better understand who is attending the program and if the program is effective or not. You can also include the evaluation results in annual reports and in future funding proposals.

- **The Statewide Data Collection System.**
 - **Background:** In 2009 a team of Cornell researchers, led by Rachel Dunifon and Kimberly Kopko, as well as CCE parent educators, developed

the Statewide Data Collection system. This online system allows parent educators to enter data collected from pre- and post-tests at the initial and final parenting classes. The data is then analyzed and results at the County, Program and State levels are distributed to parenting educators and posted to the Parenting In Context website each year.

○ **How to Start Using the System:**

- **#1: Make sure you qualify:** Any parenting program in New York State can participate if the program includes at least six hours of content delivery (workshops, sessions, etc.) across more than one day. For example, a 6-hour session that is held in one day would not qualify. If your program meets both of these requirements then you qualify to use the system.
- **#2: Complete the online IRB tutorial:** Next, you will need to review the Institutional Review Board for Human Participants and complete an online tutorial. To learn more click on the following link:
<http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/evaluation/upload/Protocol-for-Parent-Ed-Survey-FINAL-4-9-09.pdf>
- **#3: Add your name to the protocol list:** After you have completed the online tutorial please email Eliza Cook at elc96@cornell.edu to be added to the protocol list. Once your name is on the list you can begin using the pre- and post-surveys to collect data for your parenting programs.
- **#4: Collect data:** You can access all of the forms you will need, such as pre- and post-tests (in English and Spanish) as well as consent forms by clicking on the following link:
<http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/evaluation/evaluationresourcesparentingprograms.cfm>
- **#5: Input data:** After you have collected pre- and post-tests you are ready to input the data online at: <http://sri.cornell.edu/PESystem/>. This data will be used for producing annual reports, which are posted to the Parenting In Context website every September. Keep in mind that in order to produce a report for your county or program we must have at least 20 matching pre- and post-tests. But, even if you do not meet that requirement, your data will still be included in the annual Statewide report.

➤ **Evaluations specific to your program.** The Statewide Data Collection system is a valuable tool available to parent educators across New York State. However, it is important to note that this survey does not replace your own evaluative surveys; rather it can be used to supplement your regular data collection instruments. If you choose a program that has its own evaluation surveys you will continue to use the program-specific evaluation surveys as well. Specifically, if you plan to offer the

Strengthening Families Program: For Parents and Youth 10-14 or *Parenting A Second Time Around (PASTA)* curriculum, the team at Parenting In Context will complete an analysis and produce reports for each program evaluation. All pre- and post-tests (and consent forms) can be mailed to Eliza Cook at:

Cornell University
ATTN: Eliza Cook
Policy Analysis and Management
247 MVR Hall
Ithaca, NY 14853

- **Additional information.** When you administer pre- and post-tests it can also be an ideal time to collect any other additional information that would be useful to your program. For example, you may ask participants questions about what days and times are best for them to have classes or what topics they are most interested in learning about, which can guide your future decisions.

STEP #4: Develop a funding plan

Once you have chosen a curriculum and developed an evaluation plan, securing proper funding to implement your selected program is essential to your success.

- **Consider your costs.** First it is useful to make a list of your projected costs so you know what funding you will need. Be sure to consider all potential costs, such as parent educator fees, room fees, snacks, written materials, curriculum fees, activity materials, etc. Parenting education classes will be less expensive if you can use a venue that you already have access to, or a parenting educator whose time is dedicated to facilitating parenting classes, or an administrative staff member who can help coordinate logistics. Using existing resources may significantly help to minimize costs. Discussing these details with a supervisor or Executive Director may be useful to get a better sense of your available resources.
- **Consider your funding sources.** Once you know your projected costs, you will be better equipped to find a funding source that will match your needs. Some counties fund their parenting programs through grants, their own CCE office, outside funders, community agencies, government programs, or by charging a small fee to participants. Certain funding sources may limit your options. For example, certain grants or funding from specific government agencies may only support certain programs or goals.
- **Should we charge participants?** It depends. For some counties, a significant portion of class funding is generated from participant fees and without charging parents they would be unable to fund the class. In these cases, charging participants is better than not offering the class at all. Although it is important to be mindful of parents who may not sign up for the class simply because they are unable to pay the fee. Some parent educators have found that offering a scholarship program, reduced class fees, a sliding fee scale, or asking participants

to pay as much as they can, seems to work well in order to be inclusive to all parents. Interestingly, some parent educators have even mentioned that they believe charging a small fee helps parents feel invested in the program and more motivated to attend the classes throughout the course. Note also, that depending on the class that you offer and the funding source, a number of parents may be mandated to attend your parenting class. If this is the case, payment for mandated families will likely be negotiated with the referring agency (e.g. Department of Social Services, Family Court, etc.). In general, you will need to see what works best for your county. Try out a system and ask for feedback from participants and then make adjustments. Also, be sure to create an easy, private way for participants to let you know if they are unable to pay the class fees.

STEP #5: Finalize logistics

Before recruiting participants you will need to finalize the details of your class, such as the location of your class sessions the dates and times it will occur, and who will facilitate the course.

- **Time, location, and length of classes.** In general, it is most common to offer parenting classes after 5 pm or on a weekend to accommodate working parents. However, based on your target population of interest you may need to adjust the time that you offer the class. The location should be accessible and safe to make it easy for participants to attend. Some counties offer classes in their CCE county association offices, or at a common location, such as a school, hospital, or community center.
- **Choosing a parent educator.** Choosing a parent educator will largely be influenced by funding and parent educators' availability. If possible, it is best to recruit a parent educator who is experienced, familiar with the content and target age group, and who is comfortable working with groups of parents. Parent educators should review the curriculum as soon as possible and may even be able to sit in on a class occurring in a neighboring county prior to facilitating their own class. Periodically we also offer curriculum trainings at the annual Parenting In-Service and we can also assist in coordinating regional trainings of the *Strengthening Families Program: For Parents and Youth 10-14*.
- **Offer childcare, if possible.** One common deterrent for parents being able to attend parenting classes is a lack of childcare. If possible, offering free childcare is a positive incentive for attendance. Although doing so may require additional funding, it will likely be worth the time and expense as parent educators report that offering this service significantly increases the number of parents who will be able to attend the course. Offering childcare does not always need to be an additional cost to your program. If possible, utilize creative, local resources to minimize or eliminate childcare costs. For example, you may be able to organize a

team of local volunteers, teens from a local youth program, or parents from a different parenting program to assist in your childcare efforts.

STEP #6: Recruit participants

Once you reach this point, all you need are participants to attend your program!

- **Contact your target population.** If your goal is to attract a general population, you can advertise your program in numerous venues, such as: the local schools, medical providers, government agencies, community groups and events, local listservs, and other CCE classes to attract a wide variety of participants. However, based on the program you will offer, you may have a specific target group in mind and therefore more effective to pursue specific venues to recruit your population. For example, if you are offering a program geared for parents with children ages 10-14 then it may be best to contact local schools to determine whether they may be willing to send information home with students and/or attend a PTA meeting to discuss other ways of reaching out to parents of 5th-9th graders.
- **Advertise.** Sometimes there are key words or phrases that will encourage participants to attend, such as “free childcare” or “learn how to talk with your teen.” After your first class you can ask participants what attracted them to your program and use their key words in future advertising. But, if this is your first class then asking other parents in the community or parents attending other CCE classes for advice may be useful. Be sure to consider multiple methods of reaching out to potential participants, such as Facebook, blogs, email, text, mailed letters, phone calls, posters, ads, etc. Each method may work differently in each county and depending on your target group of interest. You do not need to recruit participants using all of the suggested methods, but you may want to test out a couple and see which methods work best for your county.
- **Communicate with other community agencies and groups.** When beginning a new parenting program in your community, it is essential to communicate with other neighboring community agencies and groups that are currently offering parenting programs or refer parents to programs. By doing so, you can convey the unique contribution of your program to the community. Further, communication with neighboring agencies may result in referrals of parents from these agencies to your program or perhaps even result in a partnership with other community agencies and CCE in offering programming. In one county, this approach worked quite well: the CCE county association invited all agencies and groups offering parenting education or referrals for parents to attend a meeting where each group discussed their own program/agency and its unique contribution to parents. As a result, each agency was able to better understand their unique services as well as where their services complimented other agency services, fostering a likelihood of partnering in the future. It may be helpful to engage in a similar exercise in your county so that you can share the strengths as well as the limitations of the program

you have chosen with your community and to explore if there are partnering agencies that can assist with your programming. For example, you can explain the target group of interest (e.g., parents of teens, grandparents, etc.) and specific outcomes or goals of the program. You can also explain who the program is not intended for, such as parents suspected of child abuse or parents with serious mental issues.

- **Encourage word of mouth.** One of your best recruitment tactics will be from the parents who attend your classes. If they have an enjoyable time, feel that they learned new skills, and were comfortable in the class, they will likely encourage other parents to attend. At the final meeting be sure to encourage parents to reach out to their friends and neighbors to invite them to attend. You can even distribute small cards with contact information and dates when the program will be offered in the future for participants to hand out to friends.

Before offering the parenting class, you will also want to ensure that you consider aspects that will encourage participant retention throughout the duration of your class. Be sure to check out these tips on how to retain parents in parent education classes from Nancy Olsen-Harbich, Program Director of the Family Health and Wellness Area in the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County:

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

http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/research/upload/Professional-Page_Retaining-Parents-in-Parent-Education-Programs_FINAL.pdf

There are many factors to consider when beginning a parenting program for the first time. We hope that these tips will be useful in selecting and implementing a parenting program in your county. If you have further questions about setting up a parenting education program in your county, please contact Eliza Cook, Extension Support Specialist at elc96@cornell.edu.

Visit the *Parenting in Context* project at:

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

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