

# DC Family Policy Seminar

April 11, 1996

**Donna Ruane Morrison, Ph.D.**  
**Moderator**  
**Georgetown University Graduate Public Policy Program**

**"It takes a village to raise a child"**

*The drama of parenting begins in the delivery room, but that is only the first stage of a very long journey. For at least the first several years, parents provide the main setting in which children's development takes place and their fundamental needs are met. Parents play a central role in children's acquisition of language, social skills, and attitudes. Research evidence confirms that the quality of parenting provided to children strongly affects how they fare throughout the rest of their lives. Psychologist Urie Broffebrenner notes, that "every child needs someone crazy about them in order to thrive." Yet Burton White, another noted child psychologist, argues that it is not inevitable that children will learn and develop as well as they might.*

*The realities of family life have changed significantly in recent decades. Earnings have decreased, placing more financial stresses on families; a larger share of mothers is in the workforce creating a need for child care and increasing the time demand placed on parents; and divorce is more prevalent today than it was years ago. In addition, today's parents face the additional stresses of increased crime, drugs, and violence in the media. While all families are affected by these changes, some parents face additional difficulties making effective parenting especially challenging. Teenage parents, for example, and parents with low-incomes face enormous barriers to children's safety and well-being. Social support networks are no longer as strong due to shifts in family life and the increasing mobility of young parents.*

*While their individual needs and circumstances differ, ALL parents need support. Society has a vested interest in encouraging effective parenting and supporting parents in their childrearing roles. Society benefits by enabling parents to fulfill their obligation to their children. Given scarce resources, District government and agencies face a limited variety of courses. However, several options still exist: 1) expand funding for family support centers; 2) encourage companies to have family friendly work places and offer parenting classes; 3) fund more demonstration projects to teach fathers how to parent more effectively. This seminar will provide discussion as to what type of policy is good for DC. Should we target programs to high risk populations? Or, will all parents be invited to participate? Where should the majority of funding come from? Federal or local sources?*

**Lori Parker**  
**Counsel to the Committee**  
**Office of Councilmember Lightfoot**

*When parents who need assistance in raising their child are not afforded that opportunity—and therefore are unable to provide warm, loving and supportive environments—at some point the government will step in and assume responsibility for that child.*

**Main Points:**

- There is a growing concern in the United States about how to approach the increasing number of children that have been abused or neglected, or for whatever reason are involved in the juvenile justice system. Determining the role the courts, juvenile and adult institutions, advocates, policymakers, and children themselves should play in addressing juvenile violence and abuse is not an easy task. What is clear, however, is that early interventions, including those directed towards the parents, are the key to achieving effective and long-term results.
- Juveniles who are exposed to drugs or other illegal activity, are abused or neglected by their care giver, live in poverty, have poor school attendance or a combination thereof, are our most vulnerable population.
- Three legislative initiatives recently passed the District of Columbia Council aimed at improving the quality of life for children:
  - 1) DC Law 10-159—"Police Truancy Enforcement Act" (introduced by Councilmember Lightfoot).
  - 2) DC Law 10-227—"Parental Responsibility Act" (introduced by Councilmember Lightfoot).
  - 3) "Juvenile Curfew Act of 1995" (introduced by Councilmember Brazil and reported out of the Committee on the Judiciary).
- DC Laws 10-159 and 10-277 came about under the premise that every parent loves their child and wants to do the right thing by their child. However, Councilmember Lightfoot recognizes that there are a group of parents, particularly those who are children themselves, who are not informed about what is considered appropriate parental behavior and therefore may not possess the skills necessary to raise a child.
- These legislative initiatives are intended to:
  - 1) Hold parents responsible for the actions or circumstances of their children.
  - 2) Assist some parents with obtaining or enhancing parenting skills necessary to improve their children's lives by referrals to parenting classes.

3) Prevent the need for further government intervention in the life of the family or child.

- While individual parenting classes differ in scope and focus, these classes appear to be effective in strengthening parents' ability to nurture and care for their child and provide the support necessary for the child to thrive.

- Unfortunately, there will be instances when a parent or child does not get the necessary support or guidance at the front end, and the child becomes a delinquent or is identified as a "Person In Need of Supervision." When this occurs, it is often just as important—if not more so—to make sure the parents remain involved in that child's life.

- Involving parents in the lives of their children is important even if the child becomes delinquent. Recent legislation sponsored by Councilmember Lightfoot ("Adjustment Process for Nonviolent Juvenile Offenders and Parent Participation in Court-Ordered Proceedings Act of 1996", Bill 11-622) does the following to keep parents involved:

- 1) Establishes a non-adversarial process for providing appropriate services and programs to juveniles charged with certain nonviolent offenses and children in need of supervision; and
- 2) Authorizes the court to hold parents or guardians in contempt of court for failing to participate in juvenile proceedings and court-ordered programs.

This legislation is important for it requires parents to be involved in the rehabilitation of their child when that child becomes involved in the juvenile justice system. Parent participation at various stages of the rehabilitation process will help deter the child from having further contact with the justice system.

- A court, under Bill 11-622, may order a parent to participate in any one of the following programs:

- 1) parenting classes;
- 2) juvenile court proceedings;
- 3) community services programs;
- 4) counseling;
- 5) substance abuse treatment;
- 6) educational programs.

- Councilmember Lightfoot has been meeting with public and private service providers that offer parenting classes to identify other possible funding sources to support these programs. The current fiscal crises in the District require us to look for other sources of funding to keep these programs open.

- ***The Committee on the Judiciary has scheduled a public hearing on Bill 11-622 for May 8, 1996 at 10:00 a.m. Please contact the Committee at (202) 727-8200 if you'd like to testify at that hearing.***

**Beverly Langford-Thomas**  
**Director, Head Start Program**  
**DC Public Schools**

*Before we implement policy to help children and families, we must ensure that policies are congruent, have local discretion, are effective, and have clear and articulated objectives.*

**Main Points:**

My comments today come from the perspective of a service provider who questions why I have to violate certain policies in order to meet client needs. What is it about these policies that makes it impossible for parents to be good parents? There are four reasons/problems I've found with current policies that make it difficult for parents to do their job:

- First, policies need to be congruent. Current policies pertaining to the Family Support Act make it extremely difficult for parents to do what's best for their children. For instance, the Act requires most parents on AFDC to work or be in training. Head Start regulations require parents to be involved with their children's learning to help improve their developmental outcomes. However, how do parents involved in training or working have time to effectively parent and be involved with the Head Start parent involvement program?
- Second, there must be local discretion built into policy. The locally designed option allows for:
  - 1) congruent policies;
  - 2) adjustments so policy relates to the needs of the population; and,
  - 3) locally determined levels of involvement for parents, and reasons why parents should be involved (e.g. will policies really impact parents or their children?).
- Third, most policies have imbedded in them some system of program accountability and effectiveness. As policies develop we need to look at new systems for evaluating programs. For instance, is it important that the state demonstrates that 75% of those eligible came to a parenting class? Or, is it more important that 25% don't need classes any more? We need to impact the thinking of legislators and policymakers to determine what changes occur.
- Lastly, the purpose and the focus of the policy must be well articulated. For instance, is the focus of the Family Support Act to get people off of AFDC? Or is the focus to make it possible to raise healthier children? If you don't know why the policy is being developed, it (the policy) clearly won't do what you want it to do. When we are talking about parent involvement, I think we're really talking about the future of children that their parents can help develop for them, and I'm not sure that our policies are clear as to what is supposed to happen as a result of this.

**Janice Melvin**  
**Acting Associate of Parent Involvement**  
**Center for Systemic Educational Change,**  
**DC Public Schools**

*Our office recognizes that parents are experiencing stresses on family life that did not exist before. Our various programs are intended to support parents and families through the new realities of family life.*

**Main Points:**

- The Center for Systemic Educational Change is the reform arm of the DC Public Schools. Our job in Parent Involvement is to offer services to parents. Our office is also involved in creating policy in the DC Public Schools. Under Title I we are mandated to have a policy in place to increase parent involvement.
- What is parent involvement? It is more than just having parents be visible in the school. We hope parents will become more involved by asking the child what they did in school, or calling another parent, or being active in the PTA. Currently, we are not able to track just which parents are involved in their children's education due to the fragmented school programs for parents.
- We have created a parent/family/community coordinating council comprised of community and advocacy groups.
- Our program holds the following beliefs about families and parents:
  - 1) all parents are important resources for their children;
  - 2) all families are capable of reaching their full potential;
  - 3) cultural and linguistic diversity must always be affirmed in each family;
  - 4) every family has their own pace, and;
  - 5) parenting is both an individual and a social process.
- The Parent Involvement Office has the following programs/initiatives in the District:
  - 1) Parent/Family Resource Centers: 60 schools have been given grants to develop a room/space for parents and children. A model center is in existence at Bancroft Elementary School.
  - 2) Toy lending library. A model program is in existence at River Terrace Elementary School.
  - 3) Parent training classes via MegaSkills Workshops. MegaSkills teach parents a variety of subjects including how to help children develop self-esteem, how to motivate a child to learn, and how to deal with difficult children.
  - 4) We collaborate with the Comprehensive School Health Office and provide training/workshops on health related issues.

5) We serve as an information clearinghouse and referral service for parents seeking help and/or information on parenting services.

- On May 17 and 18th, the DC PTA and the DC Public Schools are holding their annual, city-wide Parent Conference at Ballou High School.
- Also, DC is hosting the National PTA Convention June 20-26. Please call Linda Moody at (202) 724-5461 if you would like further information.

**Costella Tate**  
**Project Director, Parent Empowerment Project**  
**National Black Child Development Institute**

*The system has the potential to reinforce the efforts of parents.*

**Main Points:**

- The National Black Child Development Institute started its Spirit of Excellence Parent Empowerment Program (PEP) in 1992. The project was designed to identify, assess, and develop strategies to encourage the active participation of low-income African American parents in Wards 7 and 8 in Washington, DC.
- The goals of the program were to create:
  - 1) opportunities for parents to develop their own abilities so they are satisfied with their lives; and
  - 2) opportunities for parents to become more effective in raising children 0 to 3 years of age to be ready for preschool.
- Primary components of the program:
  - 1) Parents participate in individual and group interventions;
  - 2) Parents develop individual family plans, including short and long term goals with timelines for accomplishing tasks;
  - 3) Staff develop partnerships with community organizations and agencies to increase opportunities for PEP parents.
- The success of the program was partly due to:
  - 1) Program was developed around the stated needs expressed by the parents;
  - 2) Group sessions were interactive and designed to encourage full participation from all of the parents;
  - 3) Participants were both male and female. They included all ages and relationships (grandparents, aunts, uncles);
  - 4) Family facilitators work with the parents at sites located within the three targeted neighborhoods; and
  - 5) Regular home visits were made to each family.

- Outcomes of the PEP:

- 1) There were 54 parents involved in PEP on a regular basis. The original goal of 40 parents was exceeded.
- 2) Fathers became interested in PEP. At one site, a fathers' group was started. At the other sites, fathers joined the women in their groups.
- 3) A formal evaluation was done on all the parents. This included a pre evaluation and a post evaluation (administered one year later).
- 4) A model curriculum was developed based upon the work with the PEP parents.

- Lessons learned from this program:

- 1) Communities need to value parents if they want to work with them. Programs cannot "talk down" to parents.
- 2) Parents need to feel and understand that they are their children's first teachers.
- 3) Parents need to feel good about themselves.
- 4) By focusing on the ages of zero to three, programs will ensure that children start on a better foot in school.
- 5) Programs need to be around for a while to help the parents get rid of any baggage they may have.

**Mark Robinson,  
Family Development Specialist  
New Community Family Place**

*"Father friendly" programs need to be flexible and built from the needs of the target population.*

- Father-centered programs began at our centers because many fathers already participate in our various activities. These fathers wanted more ways to become involved and wanted programs and curriculum targeted especially for them.
  
- How does one develop "father friendly" programs and attitudes? It is not enough to say that men can come if they want to come. Programs can do the following to become more father and male friendly:
  - 1) Address letters to both parents.
  - 2) Make program and center hours need to be flexible to fit the needs of clients.
  - 3) Listen to your client—they will tell you what they need.
  - 4) Be creative in how you get your fathers involved. For instance, at our center, we had the fathers help us build a garden, and during the breaks we would talk about parenting issues.
  - 5) Visit families at home to see how fathers are coping.
  
- Many of our fathers have become connected with the program and stay on after their children have outgrown the center.
  
- Our center offers interactive seminars and workshops for parents. Our recent workshops include:
  - 1) "Trials and Tribulations of Parenthood." At this workshop we shared our different views of discipline and discussed alternative models for parents to follow.
  - 2) "Birth Experiences." At this workshop, we linked parents expectations to the birth process to what they actually experienced.
  
- Our parenting classes did not begin on the right foot. Parents were not interested in following a workbook or a set curriculum. Attendance increased when we made the class interactive. We asked fathers to describe their experiences and problems and we discussed solutions in class.



**Community Announcements and Discussion**

*The DC Family Policy Seminar graciously acknowledges the generous space and facilities offered by the Academy for Educational Development, and the help in obtaining the space provided by the Center for Youth Development.*

**COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

**Parenting Education Directory/Parent Education Collaborative:**

The Pew Foundation in Philadelphia estimates that there are 60,000 parenting organizations around the country. The District itself has a rich tradition of offering family support through churches, schools, and not-for-profit organizations.

The Parenting Education Initiative has prepared and published a "Parent Education Directory" listing all organizations in the District that offer parenting services and resources.

If you would like a copy of the resource guide, or want more information regarding the Parent Education Collaborative, please call Marsha Sprinkle at Catholic Charities: (202) 526-4100.

**QUESTIONS:**

**Legislating parenting classes:**

**Q:** I'm struck by the difference between current District legislation "telling" parents they have to participate in parenting education, and programs that focus on "asking" parents what they need. As a program director, I would hope that legislation would be responsive to programs that are providing services that parents are requesting.

**A:** The current Parent Responsibility Act and Truancy Law provides parenting classes as an *option* for the court. But Bill 11-622—which holds parents in contempt if they don't attend classes, community service program, or substance abuse program—does focus on mandating courses for parents. Councilmember Lightfoot drafted this stricter provision enforcing classes because parenting education providers told us that while parenting programs are successful, providers cannot make parents attend. Our hope is that these classes will be the first step for many parents—but they need to attend if we are to help them. We will hear testimony on this issue May 8th at 10:00 a.m. I encourage any of you to testify and voice any concerns you may have about this very important issue—Lori Parker.

**Q:** Is there any provision in the law to train the judges about programs, so they know which programs are appropriate for a specific parent?

**A:** There is no provision in the current proposal. The provision is written very broadly so the court has numerous program options from which to choose. The law is written with consideration of its fiscal impact and with the recognition that there may not be

many available programs. The legislation was broadly defined to anticipate future resources and programs—Lori Parker.

**Teenage parents:**

**Q:** What can we do about the increasing number of teenage girls that are becoming parents, specifically in the light of a new report indicating that many of these girls are having children with men 5-15 years their senior?

**A:** We find that teenage moms' priorities change after having a child. Some teenage moms believe that having a baby will help them reach their goals. In our program, we work with these girls to help modify their goals and priorities now that they are mothers. We also give them with self improvement and parenting skills they need to survive. We also found that as parents became more involved in our program, their relationships changed with their partners, children, and others. The bottom line is that programs need to be long-term to provide information on how to help people move ahead with their life once they've had a child—Costella Tate.

**Diversity in parents:**

**Q:** The diversity of our parents is increasing, not only in cultural diversity, but in the different "kinds" of parents—such as foster parents, grand-parent parents, and gay parents—we have. Does anyone on the panel provide services specifically for these new "kinds" of parents?

**A:** Initially, PEP did not recruit parents who had a lot of problems (e.g. substance abusing parents, CPS parents, and others) and who needed extensive services. There were other community programs which could meet the needs of these parents. PEP was looking for parents who would be easy to motivate towards empowering themselves into action. Currently parents required by CPS to attend a parenting program have contacted PEP for services. As we interviewed these parents, we found that most had continued to have babies even after CPS had removed their older children. In my opinion, these parents need long term programs to work their needs and issues. Our project is designed to "meet parents where they are". It doesn't matter what kinds of problems parents experience, their social status or their sexual preferences. They are all parents--experiencing the same parenting issues and concerns.—Costella Tate.

**A:** We have worked with gay parents in our program and have been unable to get them involved in group situations. Many gay parents are reluctant to attend groups for they feel they have a private issue and are not ready to talk with a large group. Even though parenting issues are the same regardless of who you are, many gay parents are afraid of how they will be perceived if they discuss their problems with service providers and other group members—Mark Robinson.

**A:** From an administrative standpoint, we encourage the local schools to recognize, respect, and treat each and every parent with dignity regardless of their background—Janice Melvin.

A: It is very important for service providers to get feedback from the parents about their individual needs. Each community has a different "feel" depending on who lives there, the strengths of the perceived parent leaders in that community, and the cultural differences. I beg all of you to get out of your offices, get a good look at your communities, and understand the cultural needs of each group. Your program should be built around the information which you gather from the parents in the community—Costella Tate.

### **Will mandated programs stigmatize families?**

Q: While I recognize that current social and economic conditions have given rise to the need for more parenting classes, I would hate to see mandated programs stigmatize certain classes and races. I believe the need for parenting programs crosses all socio-economic lines. Ideally, community programs would cut across these boundaries and offer classes that would help parents from all over the community. I also believe we need to encourage and empower parents in our society and develop policies that truly value parents and their work in raising children. We need to look at the individuals and ask them to decide what policies work best instead of leaving all of that up to the policymakers.

A: Most of our programs are geared towards parents at a low-social economic level. But we recognize that all parents need support, and we need to bring in more parents from all levels—Janice Melvin.

A: Our program in particular is very diverse. Everyone is learning from everyone else, and we find that everyone—whether they receive AFDC benefits, are unemployed, or are middle class—has the same problems when it comes to parenting. The structure of our groups allows for role-modeling to take place on a regular basis—Mark Robinson.

A: In our parenting program, we've begun to think of services as universal because all parents are facing difficulty with parenting. Services need to be provided in a non-stigmatizing way. One way to do this is to build parenting education into existing programs. For instance, at the hospitals where parents are being seen for prenatal care, parenting classes could be built into the prenatal program. At Catholic Charities, all of our programs (e.g. health treatment, after care, transitional care) have a parenting component so that people voluntarily attend these programs. We treat parents as consumers in our programs, and we view them as the central factor in their child's life. Parents have the right to demand programs where and when they need them and ask for a curriculum that's interesting and culturally appropriate—Marsha Sprinkle, Catholic Charities.

A: Our philosophy is that parenting programs are universal. Our program specifically targets parents with children under five years old. It is a home-based program that provides home visitors to parents to help them with parenting needs and questions. This is a voluntary program and has had great success on a national level. Our

programs have been evaluated and have been found effective. Our core belief is that parents know their children better than anyone else. We can help parents by providing them with tools (e.g. printed materials) and acting as a resource for parents—Judy Fisher, Parents as Teachers.

**Role of volunteers in parenting programs:**

**Q:** Can you expect volunteers (e.g. college students, other parents) to be involved in parenting programs?

**A:** When adding a volunteer component to your program, it is critical to apprise your volunteers of what to expect in that community via training. Training in safety, protection, and understanding the culture of the targeted community, is crucial to their success as volunteers. One idea is to team up with another organization that works in that particular community and work as a force—Costella Tate.

**A:** The DC Public Schools has volunteer programs. To get involved, please call the Corporate Involvement Office or contact your local school directly. We have an ongoing training program for individuals interested in tutoring in the schools—Janice Melvin.

**A:** Our center is located in Ward 8. One suggestion I have for volunteers coming into this area is to be well trained when they enter the community. Too often, volunteers come in with a certain preconceived idea of what they'll find in Ward 8. It's important that volunteers understand that Ward 8 is not any more dangerous than any other part of this city. I also encourage any groups that work in Ward 8 to contact me and to see how we can work together in this community—Brenda Jones, Parklands Community Center.

**A:** We must remember that grandparents are important volunteers as well. Our grandparents do a lot of work with children in facilities (e.g. hospitals, group homes). Our program is considering branching out to work with teenage pregnancy and parenting issues and I would welcome ideas and thoughts from any other agencies. (You may call me at 678-4215)—Constance Todd, Foster Grandparent Program.