

# CONSORTIUM CONNECTIONS

## In this issue

No job is more challenging or rewarding than being a parent. But, despite all the public discussion about the importance of family values, parenting is still a pretty lonely endeavor. What kinds of formal and informal supports do parents need to be good parents, raise healthy kids, and connect to their communities? This issue of the newsletter looks at our growing knowledge of parent-child connections, the continuum of parenting from birth to adulthood, the great diversity of families

and kinds of parenting, and the extent to which parents' behavior influences children's education, career and work life, and establishment of their own families. And, we are beginning to understand the public dimension of parenting: strong families make strong communities.

The guest co-editor for this issue is Madge Alberts, Children, Youth & Families Program Leader for the University of Minnesota Extension Service.

## Middle Passages: Parenting Children 5 to 18 years old

*M. Marty Rossmann, Family Education Program, University of Minnesota*

How often we hear a parent bemoan, "If I knew then, what I know now!" Parenting children of any age is one of life's toughest assignments, but there are particular challenges for parents of children 5 to 18 years old. Most parents of older children are working. Their children are adjusting to school and gaining independence. Parents and children alike can feel torn and pulled in many directions. What was appropriate parent-child interaction when a child was 2, may not seem to be working when that child is 8. What marks this middle passage in parenting experiences and what critical supports are available to families?

The concerns parents face today are considerable, while the support systems that guided them in the past have eroded. Parents of older children report that they often feel isolated, are uncertain about what is developmentally normal behavior for their children, and have no place to turn for support. Today's families are more diverse, and because of divorce and re-marriage, children may experience family life through the lens of one or several parents. Family mobility and long working hours mean that children may be alone or care for younger siblings during non-school hours.

What are the best ways to support parents during these demanding middle years as they guide young children to adulthood? That question is driving a new research and outreach project that is a partnership between the Family Education Program in the Department of Work, Community and Family Education and the Children, Youth & Family Consortium. Former Chair of the University of Minnesota Regents, Thomas Reagan, is one of the driving forces behind the project, urging that the best research and practice be available to parents in Minnesota. The College of Education and Human Development and the office of the Executive Vice President and Provost have provided start up funds and encouragement.

As the project moves along, the question of why parents need help in the first place keeps coming up. This may have occurred to Consortium newsletter readers, too!

### Why is parenting more than a private matter?

No job is more important to Minnesota's future than that of parent, and no job is more challenging. Public policy, however, hasn't kept up with the changing needs of parents.

There are close links between the quality of parents' interaction with their children and a range of problems and risky behaviors in older children, including depression, lower standardized test scores, and a lack of skills to make healthy decisions and to resolve conflicts.

Middle Passages: Parenting Children 5 to 18 years old

—continued on page 3

### Mission Statement

*The Children, Youth & Family Consortium was established in fall 1991 in an effort to bring together the varied competencies of the University of Minnesota and the vital resources of Minnesota's communities to enhance the ability of individuals and organizations to address critical health, education, and social policy concerns in ways that improve the well-being of Minnesota children, youth, and families.*

# BEST BETS for Parent Education

Ada Alden is a long-time friend of the Consortium and a seasoned parent educator who directs Family Education Services for the Eden Prairie Public Schools. As a member of the administrative team, she ensures that research, policy and practice function in harmony. We have asked her to answer some frequently asked questions about parent education.

*Q: What are parents' greatest concerns when it comes to parenting school-aged children?*

A: Balancing work and family life. Parents worry they aren't spending enough time with their children — sharing stories at the kitchen table, having family meetings, and making family decisions. Parents feel that the fast-paced, technologically-driven, consumer culture is exerting too much control, while their parenting years are flying by. They want to be more playful and thoughtful in using family time.

*Q: What are the most effective ways that communities and schools can support parents of school-aged children?*

A: Recognize the value of "at home learning," and help families include learning and education in their every day lives. Creating a home and raising children are supremely time-intensive activities that demand a great deal. Communities and schools need to continue to reinforce the critical role parents play and provide systems that help them do that job. The background and characteristics of the family itself matter far more in determining student achievement than any attribute of the formal educational system.

*Q: How can we reach out to support parents in new ways?*

A: In Eden Prairie, we offer classes for parents taught by valued and revered teachers in the high school. Students care about these teachers and market the classes to their parents. Parents are eager to listen to someone their child respects. A parent educator and other staff grounded in adolescent development provide key suggestions during the open discussion that focuses on parental responsibility and competency skills. Popular topics have included violence, fathering, healthy relationships, and parent expectations.

*Q: What is the one thing that would really advance our various efforts to support parents?*

A: Train staff, including administrators, on how to communicate to parents. Parents are adult learners, while too many of our educators are skilled at teaching children. Educators are comfortable with jargon, while parents are hesitant to ask, "What does higher order thinking mean?" Skip the jargon and focus on the value of two-way communication.

Recognize that parenting does not end as children enter the kindergarten classroom. A licensed parent educator can provide critical information and support in ways that social workers and psychologists may not. A parent educator is just that — one who educates.

*Parent education for school aged children is about building skills at the kitchen table.*

—Ada Alden,  
Eden Prairie Public Schools.

*Parents feel their roles shift when children move from elementary to middle school. These changing roles are confusing to parents and can result in parents abdicating their responsibilities to teachers or other adults at just the moment when their kids need them the most.*

—Ada Alden,  
Eden Prairie Public Schools.

## CONSORTIUM CONNECTIONS

*Consortium Connections* is published three times a year by the Children, Youth & Family Consortium: A University and Community Collaboration.

**Co-editors:** Madge Alberts, Jenny Keyser  
**Design:** Brett Olson



Children, Youth & Family Consortium  
University Gateway, Suite 270A  
200 Oak St. S.E.  
Minneapolis, MN 55455  
612/625-7849 Fax 612/625-7815  
email: cyfc@tc.umn.edu  
www: http://www.cyfc.umn.edu

*The University of Minnesota is an equal opportunity employer and educator. This publication is available in alternative formats upon request. Please contact us at the number above.*

## CONSORTIUM STAFF

**Martha Farrell Erickson** Director  
**Jenny Keyser** Associate Director  
**Amy Susman-Stillman** Program Coordinator  
**Wendi Schirvar** Program Coordinator  
**Michael Brott** Community Partnership and Information Coordinator  
**Connie Blasing** Executive Secretary  
**Ruth McFarlane** Office Specialist  
**Madge Alberts** Program Leader, U of M Extension Service

## CONSORTIUM ADVISORY COUNCIL

**Bill Allen** Family Therapy Resources  
**Rusty Barcelo** Associate VP, Multicultural Affairs, U of M  
**Michael Benjamin** Nat'l Council for Family Relations  
**Peter Benson** Search Institute  
**Robert Blum** Adolescent Health Program, U of M  
**Dale Blyth** 4-H Youth Development, U of M  
**Bill Bomash\*** U of M Extension Service  
**Harry Boyte** Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, U of M  
**Rose Brewer** Afro-American & African Studies, U of M  
**Marcie Brooke** Working Family Resource Center  
**Norm Coleman** Mayor, City of St. Paul  
**Nicki Crick** Institute of Child Development, U of M  
**Gerald Cutts** Developmental Corp. for Children  
**Sue Devitch** Department of Children, Families & Learning  
**Ed Ehlinger** Boynton Health Service  
**Mark Fiddler** Vincent & Fiddler  
**Lynn Galle** S. G. Moore Laboratory Nursery School, U of M  
**Jackie Getting** Steele County Extension Office  
**José González** Minneapolis Health Department  
**Hal Grotevant\*** Family Social Science, U of M  
**Tené Heidelberg** WomenVenture  
**Fran Hesch** Minnesota Parenting Association  
**Jan Hively** College of Edu. and Human Development, U of M  
**Janice Hogan, Past Chair** Family Social Science, U of M  
**John Hottinger** Minnesota Senator  
**Jan Jernell** Minnesota Department of Health  
**David R. Johnson** Inst. on Community Integration  
**Judith Kahn** Konopka Inst., U of M  
**Barbara Kimer** Youth Trust  
**Ann Kirby McGill** Institutional Relations, U of M  
**Jim Koppel** Children's Defense Fund  
**Scott Lanyon** Bell Museum, U of M  
**Jeanne Markell** U of M Extension Service  
**Joän Patterson, Chair** Maternal and Child Health, U of M  
**Maynard Reynolds** U of M (retired)  
**David Rodbourne** MN Center for Corporate Responsibility  
**Marty Rossmann** Work, Community & Family Edu., U of M  
**Sharon Sayles Belton** Mayor, City of Minneapolis  
**Catherine Solheim** Assoc. Dean, College of Human Ecology  
**Barbara Sykora** Minnesota State Representative  
**Patricia Tommet** Children's Health Care  
**Mark Vukelich** Fairview Health System  
**David Walsh** National Institute on Media and the Family  
**Peg Wangensteen** Congregations Concerned for Children  
**Pam Perri Weaver** Department of Government Relations  
**Richard Weinberg\*** Institute of Child Development, U of M  
**Janet Wiig** Institute on Criminal Justice  
**Oliver Williams** School of Social Work, U of M  
**Wynne Wright** U of M Morris  
**Gretchen Wronka** Hennepin Co. Library Assoc.

\* emeritus

## DEANS' POLICY COUNCIL

**John Brandl** Dean, Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs  
**Robert Bruininks** Executive Vice President & Provost  
**Charles Casey** Dean, U of M Extension Service  
**Frank Cerra** Provost, Academic Health Center  
**Dan Detzner** Dean, College of Human Ecology  
**Sandra Edwardson** Dean, School of Nursing  
**Robert Jones** Vice Provost  
**Edith Leyasmeyer** Dean, School of Public Health  
**Christine C. Maziar** VP for Research & Dean of Graduate School  
**Al Michael** Dean, Medical School  
**E. Thomas Sullivan** Dean, Law School  
**Steve Yussen** Dean, College of Edu. & Human Development

# Take Back Your Kids: Confident Parenting in Turbulent Times

William J. Doherty, Family Social Science, University of Minnesota

A few years ago I wrote a book about family rituals such as dinner, bedtime talks, weekend outings, and family vacations. When I began to give talks to parent groups about these ideas, I was struck by two important reasons why families have trouble doing regular family rituals: they have given away family time to outside activities, and many parents are not confident enough in their family leadership to make the rituals happen when children resist.

Surveys have documented a decline in family dinners and family vacations, and the widespread sense of families being rushed and over-scheduled. A chief culprit appears to be the time that children spend in sports and other outside activities. These activities now dominate the family schedule year round, interfering with family dinners, weekend religious participation, and vacations. The age of starting demanding activity schedules has now reached to the kindergarten and even younger levels. In one community, there are 14 community activities for three year olds, and 11-year olds have hockey practice on Thanksgiving morning. Children who miss the practice are benched.

Many parents are aware of this problem but lack the confidence and the support to pull back from family hyperactivity and regain their leadership. They fear that they will deprive their children of important social or athletic experiences. They get pressure from other parents to “max out” their children’s individual potential—why just one sport or one musical instrument or one form of martial arts? But there is little support to make family time and family activities the highest priority. The result is over-tired and over-booked children, and

parents who live like harried recreation directors on the family cruise ship.

Reluctance to rein in excessive outside activities, and to lead the way in maintaining family rituals, can be seen in other areas where parents are insecure in setting limits on their children. Young children wear us down in Target and we buy them things they do not need. Years later we cannot say “no” when they insist on an un-chaperoned senior year trip to Cancun, Mexico (an experience which, in the past, has not occurred until college years). We end up debating with our children, hoping they will agree, rather than clearly setting limits, after appropriate explanations and discussion.

My newest book, *Take Back Your Kids*, was written to address these issues. It is a call to action for modern parents to be both nurturing and sensitive to our children’s developmental needs, and to be confident authority figures and limit setters when it comes to family time and children’s inappropriate behavior. Hundreds of research studies have demonstrated the value of this kind of love and limits. But many caring, competent parents have lost their way in this challenging era for raising children.

If you are interested in a new social movement by parents to make family life a higher priority in our overscheduled, consumer-saturated world, look for information on the Family Life 1st project in Wayzata, Minnesota on the web at [www.familylife1st.org](http://www.familylife1st.org), which will be on-line beginning in late June.



Family rituals such as annual camping trips are one way to put family life as a high priority.

---

## Middle Passages: Parenting Children 5 to 18 years old

—continued from cover

Parents exert remarkable influence over their children’s attitudes toward work and employment. If parents model poor work attitudes or convey messages that lead to low self-esteem, then employers will have employees that are not motivated or prepared for work life.

Minnesotans shy away from intruding into family matters, but they intuitively know the importance and difficulty of parenting. Successful programs have shown that parent education, coupled with parent-to-parent support, can reduce isolation, increase confidence, increase knowledge about children, change expectations of parents for themselves and their children, and change behaviors in parent-child interaction.

Parents themselves are asking for help. In a recent survey of 150 parents with children aged 5-18, parents were very clear about the issues they are struggling with: helping children understand family and community values, setting limits that work for children, responding appropriately when children rebel against those limits, dealing with feelings of loss of control as children mature, motivating children to succeed at school, managing the challenges of work-family life, helping children feel good about themselves, and connecting with the community.

Minnesota has been and should continue to be the leader in providing education for parents, not only for parents of infants and toddlers, but also for parents of children in the challenging ages of 5-18. The outcomes of such an effort to support and educate parents are not only stronger families, but also stronger communities and better futures for youth.

### What is Parenting Education?

50,000 programs nationwide offer parenting education, and they vary tremendously. “Some emphasize communication skills; others focus on parents as teachers. Some train parents for childbirth; others are for parents with adolescents. They can be located in homes, churches, social centers or schools. Some illustrate what parents should do based on the program’s philosophy or established research findings. Other programs help parents articulate their values and integrate them into their parenting... Ideally, the parenting education component of family support programs should help parents find the information and skills they need.”

—“Sharing the Wisdom of Parenting,”  
Karen Debord, Harriet Heath, Dana  
McDermott, Randi Wolfe,  
*Family Support Magazine*, Winter 2000.

# Community-based supports for parents

When families and communities are directly involved in shaping parenting programs wonderful things happen. No place is this clearer than at Neighborhood House's School First program.



At Neighborhood House, kids and teachers practice songs in English and Spanish to prepare for Child Care Graduation.

In 1998, when principals at three local elementary schools became alarmed that their young students were not attending school regularly, they went to the experts — the staff at Neighborhood House, which has been a community haven for working families on the West Side of St. Paul for 103 years. From that initial step was born School First, a joint venture of Neighborhood House and Roosevelt, Riverview, and Cherokee Heights Schools. The backbone of the program is a cadre of bi-cultural

family workers who forge close partnerships with parents and children to help address barriers to school attendance. In the process, they help parents, too, many of whom are members of the thriving Latino/Chicano community.

Six- and seven-year-olds don't skip school for the same reasons high school students do. It is usually a family issue that prevents elementary-aged children from getting to school: housing, employment, transportation, substance or domestic abuse, or simply running out of money at the end of the month to launder school clothes. In families in which parents don't speak English, the kids serve as a crucial

life link; when it is perceived that they are needed, the kids stay home.

"Every parent wants the best for their children," says Celeste Brosenne, a School First family worker, "but sometimes crises get in the way. However, it's even more difficult to address attitudinal barriers." Despite the efforts of schools to be inviting, some parents feel intimidated or are swayed by bad experiences at school, and education may not have been a priority in their own families. Now, family workers are helping these parents put "school first" for their children. They are omnipresent in the schools, are assisting parents with housing, job and health needs, and are working to strengthen community supports for parenting, such as family nights at the Riverview Branch Library.

The results? Nearly 100% of the participating parents attended school conferences this year. And over 50% of the children involved in School First have improved their attendance. Parents are also more confident. In fact, one parent was able to take action when a housing dispute arose by using the resources and skills she gained through the program. She knew that housing stability was important for her elementary-aged children because after all "school comes first."

For more information about School First, call Celeste Brosenne at Neighborhood House, 651-227-9291.

## Seeing the Whole Picture

*When we see a mother being harsh or inappropriate with her child we may too quickly assume that she needs information on child development or parenting strategies. If she is working two minimum wage jobs, is unable to afford quality childcare, and has no place to turn when experiencing domestic violence, these experiences will take a toll on her parenting. And even if she does just need child development information or effective parenting strategies, we need to ensure that these are provided in ways that are meaningful, accessible, convenient, affordable, and according to the family's culture and situation.*

—"Beyond the Curriculum,"

Carol Mertensmeyer,

Family Support Magazine, Winter 2000.

## Chicano-Latino Parenting

*Guillermo Rojas, Chair of Chicano Studies, University of Minnesota*

Parenting in the Chicano and Latino community comes in many shapes and forms, from parents to grandparents and from extended family members such as aunts and uncles to older siblings or cousins.

Chicano-Latino households often times consist of more than one family. Newly immigrated families may provide housing for uncles or aunts, and it is not unusual for two families to be living in one dwelling. The extended family may have several adult workers and should these working parents have children, one of the non-working adults will parent the children. It is very common for a group of cousins to have an aunt or a grandparent caring for them. As long as the children are infants or in preschool, the parenting task is not considered a major challenge. For these newly arrived families, finding work — especially year-round work — is the real challenge.

Latino families in which both parents are working find that child care services at licensed centers or homes are too costly to purchase. And besides, these Latino parents feel they can rely on their wide circle of friends and relatives to parent their children while they are at work. As long as the children are toddlers or in elementary school, the parenting responsibilities are feasible and are shared without much hardship to the family. Proper food, caring supervision, safe environments, and appropriate child play are negotiable between the primary care-giver and parent.

However, as children grow into the middle school and high school years, parenting becomes a challenge. Drugs, alcohol, and companions who are substance abusers are parenting problems that are not easy to supervise or to mediate in large households. In Chicano-Latino households parents struggle to address drug and alcohol problems without the long-arm intervention of social services or the police. In fact, Chicano-Latino parents often times do not know what support systems are in place to help them parent their troubled adolescents, or they are reluctant to take advantage of these services because of language barriers.

And social service agencies don't always reflect cultural practices. In the 1980's, Centro Cultural Chicano, then housed on Dupont Avenue in North East Minneapolis, opened a child care program with funds from Hennepin County, but the county funds were restricted and allowed only single working mothers to enroll their children. Many families saw this as discriminatory because two-parent working families were not entitled to services and the county had narrowly defined the needs of parents.

# Authoritative Parenting Involves Balance

Ronald L. Pitzer, School of Social Work, University of Minnesota,  
Project Director of Positive Parenting, University of Minnesota Extension Service.

Authoritative parenting, according to Lawrence Steinberg, is the reasonable balance of three major aspects of parents' behavior toward their children—nurturance, discipline and respect. The balance of these three is critical for effective parenting, and holds across cultures and economic circumstances.

## Parental responsiveness (*love, warmth, nurturance*):

Parental responsiveness is the extent to which parents respond to the child's needs in an accepting, supportive manner. It is a very powerful force in the development of children, and most children probably do not get enough. Nurturance helps children feel loved, secure, and cared about, and it fosters children's acceptance of discipline and parental demands. There are many ways to respond to and nurture children, including listening attentively, spending time with children, being available, and giving more attention to that which pleases and less to that which does not ("catch them being good").

## Parental demandingness (*discipline, control*)

Demandingness is the extent to which a parent expects and demands responsible behavior from children. This dimension includes both setting and enforcing rules or limits on children. In order to be enforced, rules must be clear, reasonable, developmentally appropriate, fair and just, mutually agreed upon, flexible, and emphasize what **to** do rather than just what **not** to do.

Enforcement of rules is much more than just punishment. Indeed, punishment is probably the least effective of the alternatives available. Monitoring and understanding children's behavior, preventing misbehavior, rewarding good behavior, and guidance are more effective tools.

Parents vary on how they balance these two dimensions. Some parents are warm and accepting while others are unresponsive or even rejecting. Some parents are demanding and expect a great deal of their child, while others are permissive and demand very little. The four **parenting styles** created by the interplay of high and low parental responsiveness and demandingness are shown in the following graph.

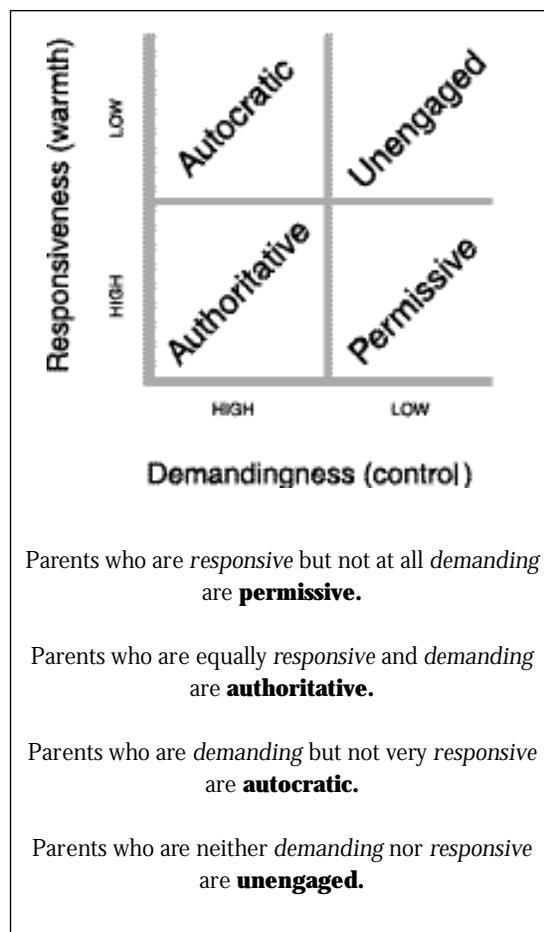
## Granting Psychological Autonomy (*Respect*)

This somewhat complicated sounding concept is increasingly being recognized by scholars to be equally as important as responsiveness and demandingness, particularly as children reach adolescence. This concept helps to clarify parental control, by distinguishing between **behavioral** and **psychological** control.

According to Steinberg, the child development literature indicates that "adolescents appear to be adversely affected by psychological control—interference in the youngster's psychological autonomy—and positively influenced by behavioral control or the presence of demandingness." Inadequate parental control deprives the child of guidance and supervision and therefore places the child at risk for developmental difficulties. Too much psychological control can limit the young person's opportunity for self-discovery, disrupt the establishment of identity, undermine confidence, and result in inadequate understanding and expression of emotions.

One reason this third dimension—granting psychological autonomy—has been overlooked in much of the socialization literature is because that literature consists heavily of studies of young children. The psychological autonomy dimension does not emerge as a critical variable until children reach early adolescence, around age 10 or 11, and begin to establish an independent psychological identity.

The University of Minnesota's Positive Parenting project has been evolving a conceptual framework built around these three concepts—responsiveness (or nurturance), demandingness (or discipline), and granting of psychological autonomy (or respect) – which guides its research, educational materials and professional development efforts. For further information about this conceptual framework and the many parenting tools or practices that derive from it, see the *Positive Parenting* curricula, parent materials, or website ([www.parenting.umn.edu](http://www.parenting.umn.edu)). The *Positive Parenting* team welcomes your questions and suggestions. **(Citations and sources for this article are available on request)**



## KEYSTONE PARTNERS

The University of Minnesota Extension Service is the outreach arm of the University of Minnesota, with offices in every county of the state. And it is one of the Consortium's Keystone Partners. Extension educators focusing on youth and family development are key partners in parenting education throughout the state. The Extension Service in Minnesota is part of the National Cooperative Extension System, a nation-wide network connected with the United States Department of Agriculture and land grant universities around the nation. Visit Extension's website at

[www.extension.umn.edu](http://www.extension.umn.edu)

KEYSTONE PARTNERS Together building bridges for the well-being of children, youth and families.

# Parents Forever



## Mandated Divorce Education Benefits Children

Of the 5000+ parents who participated in the Parents Forever divorce education classes offered in 61 Minnesota Counties from January through October '99, 76% reported they had taken one or more positive steps to put the best interests of their children first in the divorce process. This means that over 3500 Minnesota children whose parents are divorcing have been positively affected because their parent(s) attended a divorce education class.

Improving the divorce experience for children was one of the main goals when the Minnesota Legislature passed a bill two years ago allowing judges to court order divorcing parents to attend education classes that focus on the impact of divorce on their children. Judges around the state vary considerably as to how they are exercising this authority. Some order all divorcing parents to classes, while others order only those with contested custody cases. Still others don't court order at all.

Demographic data collected by the Parents Forever program indicates that about 10% of the participants attend the classes because they are court ordered; the rest are attending voluntarily. Evaluations show that the court ordered attendees are typically more resistant at the beginning, but by the end of the six weeks of classes, 98% of them report that they are glad they attended.

One unintended benefit of the Parents Forever classes (as well as other divorce education classes offered around the state) is that they have provided a means of involving men in parenting education classes. Roughly half of the Parent Forever participants are men, and some of the most significant impacts have been reported by men.

A longitudinal study of behavior change over time is currently under way, under the leadership of the University of Minnesota Extension Service, with the goal of seeing if changes that parents report are being sustained. The study will also look at court and child support data to see if the impact extends to the legal and financial arenas.

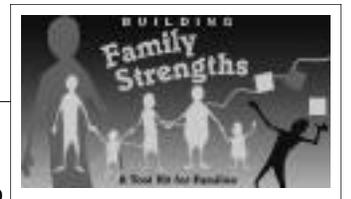
Parents Forever was developed by the University of Minnesota Extension Service. For more information contact Minnell Tralle, coordinator, at 612-625-7813.



*Divorce education programs reinforce the role of fathers in nurturing children.*

## Building Family Strengths

Taking the time to build on the strengths of individual family members and the family unit is a challenge for most families. Building Family Strengths, an interactive booklet developed by the University of Minnesota Extension Service, contains activities to help family members learn skills to show appreciation, handle conflicts, develop shared values, communicate well, and more. For more information visit [www.parenting.umn.edu](http://www.parenting.umn.edu).



## Dads are Still Making a Difference

Extension's Dads Make a Difference program is celebrating 6 years of helping young men prepare to be terrific dads. Since 1994, the program has reached over 26,000 youth throughout Minnesota, and it has trained adults and youth in 7 states. Teens are trained to teach middle school youth about the importance of fathers in the lives of children and the financial, legal and emotional responsibilities of parenting. To connect with the project, call coordinator Gary Greenfield, 651-704-2060.



## Bicultural Parenting

Raising children is always a challenge, even for people with strong parenting skills. And for Southeast Asian parents living in America, even the best parents can find themselves at a loss for answers when American culture collides with Southeast Asian traditions. Helping Youth Succeed is designed, through video and storytelling, to help families learn how other Southeast Asian parents and youth handle some of the real parenting issues they face day to day. It is available in Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, Vietnamese and English. The facilitated discussions consider not only the participants' first culture, but also the shared values and experiences within their communities. For more information, visit [www.parenting.umn.edu](http://www.parenting.umn.edu).



# Parenting in Stepfamilies – Forewarned Isn't Always Forearmed

Madge Alberts, Children, Youth & Families Program Leader,  
University of Minnesota Extension Service

*“SHE just wants to impress DAD by yelling at us.”*

These words overheard between my stepdaughters cut to the heart. I had been so conscientious about not interfering in their discipline, instead taking a more passive role and leaving the discipline to their father, my husband. But this time – this ONE time – I stepped in because one was chasing the other with a scissors, and dad wasn't around. What else could I do? But boy, did I feel guilty.

Being a stepparent is unquestionably the hardest role I have ever had.

It's ironic too, because for several years before entering this role, I had been teaching and writing about stepparenting, including evaluating teaching materials, reading books and reviewing research literature regarding stepparenting. I knew all the things stepparents “should” do. One would think I was more than adequately prepared. In fact, I thought I was prepared. After all, how hard could this be? I knew the research, for heaven's sakes.

Well. Experience has a way of turning tail on research, sometimes.

So what are some things we know, from research, about stepfamilies? And how do they fit with experience – and in this case, mine, as an extension educator focusing on family development?

**RESEARCH:** Stepfamilies don't just happen overnight. They take years to develop into a cohesive unit.

**EXPERIENCE:** Absolutely right. Anyone who enters into a stepfamily relationship expecting to have a loving, cozy family immediately is setting themselves up for disappointment. It takes years of quiet nurturing, putting personal needs aside at times, and carefully negotiating minefields like discipline, previous family traditions, and ex-spouses, to name a few.

**RESEARCH:** The couple must put the marriage relationship first.

**EXPERIENCE:** This one is really thorny. In teaching and writing, I probably placed the most emphasis on this principle, which I totally agree with. BUT – it's not as easy as it seems. When there are children living with you on a day to day basis, it's hard to put the relationship needs of the adults first all the time. Predictably, when the adults are diligent about putting their marriage first, someone feels slighted. The tendency to want to put the needs of your own children before the marriage is very great. On the other hand, when it's your spouse's children, it may be easier to put the marriage first. Whose needs come first in a blended family is a very delicate dance that must be handled with utmost care and respect.

**RESEARCH:** As stepparents, set limits and enforce them. Work them out in advance; support each other when the rules need to be enforced.

**EXPERIENCE:** Well...if it's MY child wanting to “bend the rules,” I might be a little more flexible than if it's yours. Sound familiar? Again, it's just not that easy. This issue is the cause of more arguments between stepparents than any other, and is one of the primary reason second marriages have such a high rate of break-up. And it's particularly complicated when the ex-spouse of either partner (or both) has different rules that don't mesh with yours. My experience here is that communication and negotiation skills are far more important than strict limits and enforcement.

As a practitioner who uses research routinely as part of educational programming, my personal experience as a stepparent caught me up short. How well had I been validating the experiences of those I was teaching and integrating those experiences into the research base? Clearly, as blended families continue to emerge as a widespread family form, research and experience will need to be carefully balanced in order to effectively and authentically address the issues they face.



*Sometimes the most important nurturing is simply cuddling together.*



*Building time for family activities is one important part of stepfamily development.*

## Consortium Calendar

### May

May 24

Harris Forum 2000: "The Early Years of Becoming a Family: Marriage, Parenting and Child Development," 12:30 – 4:00 pm at the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul. Keynote speakers are Carolyn and Philip Cowan, University of California, Berkeley. The event is free, but registration is mandatory; call 612-624-4510.

May 30

"Reclaiming the Authority of Families," part of a series of public seminars on contemporary issues in public life, social change and democracy presented by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, Humphrey Institute, 301-19 Ave S, Minneapolis. Featured speaker is Bill Doherty, Dept of Family Social Science. Call Elaine Eschenbach at 612-625-0412.

### June

June 2

"Substance Abuse and Domestic Violence: Understanding Change Among African Americans," a forum presented by the National Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community, which is housed at the University of Minnesota and directed by Professor Oliver Williams. For more information, call the Institute at 612-624-5357 or [www.dvinstitute.org](http://www.dvinstitute.org).

June 2

Minnesota Association of Partners in Education Annual Meeting, 9:00 am - 1:30 pm at the Science Museum of Minnesota, features a public seminar on school-business partnerships as a strategy for workforce development. To register, call 218-279-4004.

June 2-3

National Fatherhood Initiative's 3<sup>rd</sup> National Summit on Fatherhood, Hyatt Regency in Washington, D.C. Call 301-948-0599.

June 2-24

"Opera on the Farm" will bring University students and faculty to four Minnesota rural communities (Olivia, Red Lake Falls, Ihlen/Pipestone, and Lanesboro) for a production of Aaron Copeland's *The Tender Land*, which tells the story of a farm family dealing with life-changing decisions.

June 11

"So, How are the Children?" the Fourth Annual Stand for Children, 1:00 - 5:00 pm at Loring Park, Minneapolis. Contact Dana Siskind, 612-870-4454, ext.642.

June 12

"Family-Center Care Coordination for Children with Special Health Care Needs," presented by the University of Minnesota for Maternal and Child Health leaders and parents, held at Earle Brown Continuing Education Center.

# The Dance and Rhythm of Parenting

*Terrie Rose, Coordinator, Irving B. Harris Center for Infant and Toddler Development, Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota*

Long before a baby's first word is spoken, she communicates with her parents about all sorts of important things. Her body and actions form the language by which she tells of her needs, pleasures and worries—like the cry of hunger or the squeal of excitement.

Parents also use their bodies and voices to set the cadence of their interactions. By rocking and using a smooth and pleasant tone of voice, the parent creates an atmosphere of acceptance and knowing. Over time, parent and baby build a shared understanding and a lasting bond of predictability. The rhythm of their communication becomes the footwork of a well-rehearsed dance.



*Videotaping parent-child interactions helps parents become sensitive to a baby's signals and needs.*

However, babies do not always communicate clearly. Low birth weight, colic, prenatal exposure to illicit drugs or alcohol may influence the clarity and consistency of a baby's cues and rhythms. Some parents may have difficulty deciding how to respond to the shriek that splits the night or a low-intensity fuss. Other may have limited experience and knowledge of the needs of babies.

A powerful new technique – videotaping parent-child interactions – is helping parents see the subtle ways they communicate with their infants.

Community-based home visiting programs provide parents with critical information and support, and they help parents and infants establish the footwork in their new relationship. These programs, many of which begin before the birth of the child, work with parents over a period of several months or years to facilitate responsive communication and healthy relationships. Research has shown that high-quality relationship-based home visiting programs can produce enduring positive effects on the life and health outcomes of young children and their families.

To enhance the quality of home visiting programs in Minnesota a unique training has been created: the Harris ITV Seminars. These interactive seminars are offered by the Irving B. Harris Training Center for Infant and Toddler Development housed at the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota, in collaboration with the Minnesota Departments of Health and Children, Families and Learning. Led by Dr. Martha Farrell Erickson in partnership with colleagues from Public Health or ECFE, the informal consultative sessions are designed to help home visitors, trainers and supervisors build their skills as relationship-based practitioners.

The Harris ITV Seminars make ample use of videotapes of parent-infant interactions as a springboard for discussion and to illustrate ways that professionals can enhance their use of videotaping techniques. In one case presented at the seminar, a home visitor used the videotape to help a mother who was somewhat detached, observe how her child was attempting to connect with her in many positive ways. Within weeks of this session, the mother was more engaged and spending more time with her child.



*Home-visiting programs provide parents with critical information about feeding, bathing, communication and play.*

Relationship-based home visiting makes it easier for parents and infants to establish the important foundations of trust, sensitivity, and encouragement. And providing excellent training for practitioners is a critical link in this process.

# CONNECTION CORNER

## Transitions for Parents

Drs. Carolyn and Philip Cowan are researchers and educators at the University of California, Berkeley, who will be presenting two public discussions during their stay on campus as the Harris Visiting Scholars. They have conducted extensive research in the area of families and particularly in the transitions from partnership to parenthood, and from home to school. On May 24 they are keynote speakers for

the annual Harris Forum held at the Minnesota History Center, presenting "The Early Years of Becoming a Family: Marriage, Parenting and Child Development." The following day, they are leading a lunch time colloquium at the Institute of Child Development on the topic, "Working With Couples During Stressful Family Transitions: When Partners Become Parents and When Children Go To School."

## Strengthening Youth and Family Programs

The University of Minnesota Extension Service has named Youth and Family Development as one of four new capacity areas, and leading that area will be Catherine Solheim, Associate Dean of the College of Human Ecology and Associate Professor of Family Social Science. The other capacity areas are Community Vitality, Natural Resources,

and Agriculture, Food and the Environment. Creating these four capacity areas is part of a careful strategy to strengthen Extension programs and provide on-going quality and support. Look for more evidence of this renewal of Extension's commitment to children and families in the months to come.

## Our State Fair

For a second year, the 4-H Building and the streets surrounding it will focus fairgoers' attention on 5 Promises for Minnesota youth: to mentor, nurture, teach, protect, and serve. The Minnesota Alliance with Youth and Minneapolis Promise for Youth are among the

community partners helping 4-H turn the great Minnesota get-together into a teach-in and demonstration of the kinds of community experiences youth need to be healthy, thoughtful, and productive. To get involved in the happenings, contact Colleen Schacht, 612-625-8394.

---

# CONSORTIUM UPDATE

## New Seeds are flowering

The new Seeds of Promise reports – volume one: Early Literacy and Language; volume two: Family-School Connections — have been mailed to a wide range of citizens and leaders, including media, school administrators, parents, family educators, policy makers, business leaders, county Extension educators, faculty and researchers. In return, we've received lots of bulk orders, offers to collaborate on additional topics and initiatives, and thank you notes. Since February when the reports were completed, we have disseminated about 10,000 copies of each report. If you'd like to order multiple copies or have suggestions for ways we can share the reports, please email us at [cyfc@tc.umn.edu](mailto:cyfc@tc.umn.edu) or call 612/625-7849.

## Making Promises to Youth

At the urging of Executive Vice President and Provost Bob Bruininks, the Consortium and the Center for 4-H Youth Development have been leading a university-wide effort to designate the University of Minnesota a "University of Promise," as part of the America's Promise initiative, led by former U.S. General Colin Powell. Begun three years ago at a summit convened by five former U.S. presidents, America's Promise has provided a highly visible way for communities to strengthen and enlarge their commitment to youth. While individual faculty and programs at the University of Minnesota have assisted the initiative since its inception, becoming a University of Promise will make it possible for the institution as a whole to make a coordinated commitment to youth in Minnesota. Look for more details about this in the months to come, including a campus visit by General Powell on June 13 to publicly congratulate the University of Minnesota for becoming the first land grant university to be a "University of Promise."

## New dates for Family Re-Union

The annual Family Re-Union conference has moved from its usual summer slot to November 20, 2000 to coincide with National Family Week. This national public policy conference series will again be moderated by Vice President Al Gore and Mrs. Gore and held at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. This year's theme is intergenerational families and communities, and conference sessions will focus on these and other topics: overcoming age-segregation in public policy, life long learning and meaningful work, economic development for multi-generations, maintaining health and mental health across the life span, the power of intergenerational programs, seniors caring for family members, and families caring for seniors. The conference is co-sponsored by the University of Minnesota's Children, Youth & Family Consortium and Vanderbilt University's Child and Family Policy Center. Watch the web site ([www.familyreunion.org](http://www.familyreunion.org)) for future information.

June 13-16

"Clinical Assessment and Interventions: Adolescent Violence," an institute sponsored by the Center for Adolescent Nursing in the School of Nursing, integrates knowledge from nursing, public health and adolescent development. Guest faculty include Dr. Gary Slutkin who leads a community-wide violence prevention program in Chicago. For information, 612-626-4772.

June 19-22

"Upper Midwest Summer Series on Aging," held at Concordia College in St. Paul, will offer over 40 half- and full-day sessions on topics ranging from ethical decision making to rural aging issues and diversity. Contact the American Society on Aging, 415-974-9600 or [www.asaging.org](http://www.asaging.org).

June 29

"Healthy Generations Videoconference on Adolescent Tobacco Use," 1-3 pm, will feature the work of University of Minnesota researchers and educators and can be accessed at several Minnesota extension offices. Call Jan Pearson at 612-626-8644.

## July

July 20-22

"Ethics of Sexuality and Reproduction in Health Care," an intensive course offered by the University of Minnesota's Center for Bioethics, will examine issues of health and sexuality as they differ for adolescents, adults in their middle years, and the elderly. CEUs and scholarships available. 612-624-9440 or [www.med.umn.edu/bioethics](http://www.med.umn.edu/bioethics).

July 25-26

"Rural Minnesota: It's a Whole New Ball Game," the 3 Annual Rural Summit held in Rochester, will address a wide range of topics from families and the new agriculture to the digital divide. Check out the web site [www.minnesotaruralpartners.org](http://www.minnesotaruralpartners.org) or contact the Arrowhead Regional Development Commission, 1-800-232-0707.

July 27-30

"The Future for Children is Families," Baltimore, the 23 annual North American Conference on Adoptable Children, will be held in Baltimore, Maryland. For information, call 651-644-3036.

## August

August 1

"Building Developmental Assets in School Communities," Search Institute's Regional Training Workshop, held in Minneapolis, will explore the connections between asset framework and academic achievement. For individuals and school teams. Call 1-800-888-7828 or [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org)

August 24-Sept 2

Visit the 4-H Building during the State Fair for activities and displays that focus on youth development, co-sponsored by the MN Alliance for Youth and Minneapolis Promise for Youth.

# ON LINE AT — [WWW.CYFC.UMN.EDU](http://WWW.CYFC.UMN.EDU)

Michael Brott, Community Partnership and Information Coordinator

## **Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couple Education** [www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com)

The Coalition is an independent, non-partisan, non-sectarian organization that offers an annual "Smart Marriages/Happy Families" conference. It is an interest group of those working to prevent family breakdown through couple education. The site has information on courses, trainings, and resources, and a large clearinghouse of articles and reviews.

## **Family Support America · [www.familysupportamerica.org](http://www.familysupportamerica.org)**

This coalition, formerly called the Family Resource Coalition of America, is an alliance of people and organizations committed to supporting and strengthening America's families and communities, for the well-being of children. Their website features resources, current news, publications, links related to their areas of work: Family Support, Parent Leadership, Parenting Education and more. They also host an annual conference.

## **The National Network for Family Resiliency · [www.nnfr.org](http://www.nnfr.org)**

This national network has recently merged with the Children, Youth and Families Education and Research Network (CYFERNet). The site hosts several interest groups, from family economics to intergenerational issues, and two excellent public listservs: PAREduc is designed for anyone wanting to discuss how to teach, work with and support parents, and FAMNet is an issues-based email group for professionals who work with children and their families.

## **University of Minnesota Parent Education Resources** [www.parenting.umn.edu](http://www.parenting.umn.edu)

This web site features University of Minnesota programs that foster effective parenting, and include topics ranging from violence prevention to child care decisions. You can search for specific parenting topics or link directly to one of 13 highlighted projects, such as Dads Make a Difference, Positive Parenting, Parents Forever, and Helping Youth Succeed: A Bicultural Parenting Guide for Southeast Asian Families.

## **The WonderWise Parent · [www.ksu.edu/wwparent](http://www.ksu.edu/wwparent)**

Dr. Charles A. Smith, in the School of Family Studies and Human Services at Kansas State University, maintains this creative site on parenting and parent-child relationships. Quotes, stories and humor enliven this page, but there are also on-line courses and model programs in the community.

## Who's the Consortium?

**Guillermo Rojas**, chair of Chicano Studies at the University of Minnesota, teaches courses on Latino families and parenting and studies issues of access to public policy for minority and immigrant communities. He is a member of the all-University family affinity group, which is convened twice a year by the Consortium.

**Hal Grotenvant**, professor of Family Social Science and founding member of the Consortium, has been recognized for his outstanding contributions to graduate and professional education; he received the prestigious Morse-Alumni Award at a ceremony on April 24. His research focuses on family relationships, particularly relationships in adoptive families.

**Minnell Tralle**, Extension Educator with the University of Minnesota Extension Service in Sherburne County, is currently on a two-year leave from the county to provide statewide coordination for Extension's Parents Forever divorce education program. During her Extension career, Minnell has specialized in educational programming related to Family Development. She was one of the first Extension Educators in Minnesota to use educational programming to address the needs of divorced families

**Ron Pitzer** is an Extension Family Specialist, family sociologist, and a professor in the School of Social Work. Recognized internationally for his work in development of a discipline model based on alternatives to physical punishment, Ron has led the creation of the Positive Parenting curriculum series produced by the University of Minnesota Extension Service. Ron recently was asked by the government of Germany to train their family professionals in Positive Parenting for use throughout the country as their new "no-spanking" law is enacted.

**And the Consortium is YOU!**

Children, Youth & Family Consortium  
University Gateway, Suite 270A  
200 Oak St. S.E.  
Minneapolis, MN 55455

