

ParentLink: A model of support and integration for parents.

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Abstract:

ParentLink represents a collective of Missouri organizations and agencies striving to simplify parents' access to research-based information, services, and problem-solving support pertaining to parenting. It is based on systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1981) and, more specifically, the ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A comprehensive array of technologies augments ParentLink professionals' outreach to parents and other citizenry. For parents, the access can be as simple as a telephone call to ParentLink's WarmLine professionals. Other doorways for information and support include ParentLink's Web site, other Web applications, media campaigns, and forthcoming neighborhood-based Parenting Corners. Information gathered from parents and communities about parenting issues will in turn shape future programs and policies.

Keywords: family life education | parenting education | parents | family relations | family support programs | parentlink

Article:

A number of authors have recently suggested that there is a growing need for parenting education and family support programs that are comprehensive, integrated, responsive to community needs, flexible, and creative in using technology as a means to disseminate information (Carter & Kahn, 1996; Simpson, 1997). ParentLink has attempted to address this need. As a statewide Missouri organization, ParentLink brings together a wide array of organizations and agencies for the purpose of helping parents, professionals, and community members to more easily access parenting information, services, and support. Located at the University of Missouri and administered through University Outreach and Extension, ParentLink has moved steadily forward during the last ten years to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive parenting-support system. Today, this system capitalizes on technology and helps Missourians move away from the fragmented, piecemeal support system of the past. ParentLink's use of technology makes sense, considering that information technology has become a profound medium in family life (Hughes, Ebata, & Dollahite, 1999; Smith, 1999). Why not capitalize on technology when 94% of American households have a telephone, 98% have a television, 81%

have a VCR, 44% have a cell phone, 37% have a computer, and 19% are connected to the Internet (Hughes et al., 1999)?

In this article, we share our vision and hope to stimulate thinking about creating responsive systems of parenting education and support that capitalize on technology. Although we focus only on a single program in one state, because ParentLink has been described as a promising initiative (Carter & Kahn, 1996; Myers-Walls & Myers-Bowman, 1999; Simpson, 1997), we believe that our reflections may be of special interest to states embarking upon new or strengthening existing parenting education endeavors. We begin by laying the theoretical foundation of ParentLink and then show how ParentLink is based on an application of this framework. In doing so, we will describe the internal ParentLink operations, its external interfaces, lessons learned, challenges, and future directions.

Theoretical framework

Myers-Walls and Myers-Bowman (1999) suggest that it can be helpful to articulate the theoretical perspective underlying parenting programs, particularly if this description is done in a manner that is sensitive to practitioners who may not be intimately familiar with the theory. Similarly, Hughes (1994) expresses the need for family life education programs to have a strong theoretical foundation. Accordingly, in this section, we describe the theoretical framework underlying ParentLink. In doing so, we emphasize that we are laying out the broad framework that ParentLink operates within, and that specific interventions may be based on a number of more specific theoretical perspectives.

ParentLink bases its work on the premises generated from systems theory as set forth by von Bertalanffy (1981), and, more specifically, from the tenets of the ecology of human development perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The application of a systems approach has allowed ParentLink to emerge as a broad, comprehensive method for supporting families. In contrast to a singular program with closed boundaries, ParentLink aims to be a dynamic organization that interfaces with others whose missions are also to support children and families.

Through his model of the ecology of human development, Bronfenbrenner (1979) applies systems theory to understand children and their families. According to Bronfenbrenner, the whole can be configured as a set of nested circles, each building on the other. The inner circle, or microsystem, refers to the relationships between the child and significant others. The next level, the mesosystem, includes those settings where children and family members spend most of their time, whether that is the home, day care, school, workplace, or church. It also involves communication among individuals in each of these settings. The third level, the exosystem, entails those institutions where children and families are non-participatory, although they may be greatly impacted by policies and programs that are established by these institutions. The last level, the macrosystem level, refers to the culture that ultimately affects each of the other levels and, ultimately, children and families. ParentLink desires to integrate the levels of the ecosystem, so parents can receive the support when and how they need it.

ParentLink strives to develop a parenting-support system where a whole is created by integrating the subparts. Therefore, ParentLink uses a comprehensive approach to working with families,

family professionals, and communities. Issues are not dealt with in isolation but are addressed by considering a multitude of factors. In this model, the subparts encompass those ingredients that contribute to family members' sense of support, including, for example, informational, material, or emotional assistance. The subparts may also address social, health and safety, mental health, education, economic, or community development issues. For ParentLink staff members, this means that supporting parents requires drawing on many disciplines. For example, assisting parents in problem solving about their children's poor sleep habits could mean exploring such variables as temperament, physical and mental health, sibling relationships, parental fears, family values, extended family members' involvement, work stressors, and day care routines. Prescribing a solution for a child's sleep problems could easily miss the mark if a holistic point of view is not considered.

The parenting-support system's feedback loops drive the system. This occurs as parents' and communities' needs are identified and, in turn, this information affects the programs and policies developed to meet those needs. In this way, we use a systematic approach to study the data, implement programs and policies, evaluate the impacts, and modify as necessary.

Some systems' boundaries may be relatively permeable, while others relatively closed. ParentLink capitalizes on technology to provide parents access to parenting information and support that respects their boundaries and that is comfortable for them. If, for example, parents' boundaries prevent visits with on-site service providers, they may find making a telephone call acceptable. Because parents' boundaries can vary a great deal from open to closed, ParentLink attempts to provide as broad an array of information-sharing modalities as possible.

Technology ties the subparts of a system together to create integrated support systems. It provides the conduit by which information is gathered, analyzed, and acted upon. In many ways, technology aides in the successful delivery of a friendly system of support for families. At the same time, however, the limits of technology also restrict the ways in which information can be shared with parents. Some new ways of disseminating information to parents (and professionals) must await the development of new technological innovations (e.g., new and faster Internet capabilities) and/or extending current technologies to a wider population (e.g., to low-income individuals who do not currently have personal computers and Internet access).

History

The ParentLink model emerged in 1989, when a team of Missourians participated in a "Parenting as Prevention" Conference sponsored by the Office of Substance Abuse Prevention (currently called the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention). The intent of the conference was to create state plans of action, and many states chose to extensively deliver a single parenting curriculum statewide. The Missouri team, on the other hand, concluded that Missouri already had a wealth of parenting programs through Parents as Teachers, University Extension, Children's Trust Fund, and others. But we also realized that these were pockets of education, not comprehensive systems of support. Although Parents as Teachers systematically offered parenting education through every school district, it still did not reach parents of all ages of children. After considerable thought, the Missouri delegation created the team's mission: To create a united front

to support Missouri's parents. This mission allowed us to focus on the whole as opposed to the subparts of family support.

ParentLink coalition

Today, 35 different organizations and agencies participate in the ParentLink Coalition. The coalition's primary makeup comes from the exosystem level, or those statewide institutions where parents, for the most part, do not directly participate: state government, universities, not-for-profit agencies, and private businesses. The purpose of the coalition is to effectively provide institutional-level supports to the parents and families in local communities. On the flip side, it elicits and respects parent/community feedback in an attempt to direct institutional-level activities.

The advantages of the ParentLink Coalition in providing a support system to children and families can be briefly summarized. The coalition serves as a collection point of multi-disciplinary thoughts, ideas, materials, and programs. Second, coalition members' organizations serve as dissemination units for ParentLink-developed, as well as other institutional, products. Third, it promotes trust among participating parties, helping to create more permeable boundaries and to increase information flow from one setting to another. Finally, the coalition provides direction and guidance to ParentLink staff.

From the onset, the ParentLink Coalition envisioned itself as a united front of professionals who would come together to support parents and families. One expression of this united front included the development of a clearinghouse of parenting resources that was easily accessible by coalition members' constituencies and colleagues. Coalition members felt that, through a 1-800 telephone line, people could simply call and get the informational, material, and perhaps even emotional support they needed related to parenting. This idea led to the creation of the ParentLink WarmLine. Financial support has come from a multitude of funders, including the University of Missouri, state agencies, and the federal government. For more detailed information about the ParentLink Coalition or other aspects of the ParentLink program, contact the first author.

ParentLink program model design

In this section, we describe the ParentLink system as it is emerging from the coalition's work. Figure 1 shows ParentLink's program model design with parents as the target audience. The goal is to help them obtain research-based information, problem-solving support, and links to services. Each set of arrows represents a delivery method for supporting parents. The arrows cut across each level of the ecosystem, showing that the information and support is integral to each of the system levels. In addition, the arrows depict a feedback loop, demonstrating that information from parents is collected, analyzed, and used to affect the future information and support they receive

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Case example

To apply this theory, we present a case example to anchor our discussions. We build on this case study throughout the paper. For all cases depicted in this article, names and some details have been changed to protect parents' identities. In addition, for illustrative purposes, the following case is fictitious, although it consists of an aggregation of situations from a number of different parents.

Cody, a two year old, toddles into the kitchen, reaches for the pot handle extending from the edge of the stove and pulls it down on his head. The drenched, frightened child screams for his daddy. The father, Jack, runs to the rescue, fearing the worst but discovers his child unharmed except for a wet head and a scared soul. With a sigh of relief, Jack dries and warms the child, and then cuddles him close to calm his fears.

Later that same day, Jack, resting on his bed tired after having worked night shift, realizes that he has not seen Cody for the past 15 minutes. He calls out for Cody, but the little two-year-old does not answer. A sense of panic overcomes Jack as he searches the entire house. At Jack's last stop, he finds Cody in the bathroom, busily scooping water out of the toilet and pouring it onto the new bathroom carpet. Frustrated by this perceived non-compliant behavior, Jack grabs his son's shoulders and looks straight into his eyes and screams, "What is wrong with you? You know better! Look at this carpet! It's a mess! Why don't you listen to me?"

Not knowing what to do, Jack sends screaming Cody to his bedroom for a 5-minute time out. Less than 30 minutes after being freed from timeout, Cody returns to the bathroom for another romp with the inviting toilet bowl. And, if that was not enough, Cody's 6-month-old sister awakens early from her nap, crying to be picked up.

Relieved to be home after a long, hard day at the office, Jack's wife hurries into the house to see her family. But instead of being greeted by a loving family, red-faced infuriated Jack confronts her and yells, "I'm out of here! Just see if you can control these brats!" With that, Jack storms out of the house, slams the door and heads to the local tavern. This had become his regular stop in route to his nightly job. The tavern's consistent comforts befriended Jack during times like this but blinded him to the developing damage being done to his marriage, family, and work.

Many issues surface in this case study: a need for information related to ages and stages of child development; disciplining and redirecting behavior; supervision; safety; work-family balance; child care; individual and family stress; alcoholism; the marital relationship; and work-place sensitivity, to name just a few. In many instances, communities have a wealth of resources to support this family, but how do parents know they exist, much less access them? Where do these parents begin looking for help? How do these parents even know they need help? When communities are without resources, what measures are taken to assure that they are created so families' needs are met? In the remaining portions of this article, we describe how ParentLink addresses these and other important questions.

ParentLink's core services

ParentLink's core services include offering research-based information and knowledge, problem-solving support, and community resource information. ParentLink professionals (with the support of many external professionals) develop and manage an organized body of information for parents, families, and community members.

Research-based information

Research-based information includes:

- An in-house reference library and access to the University library.
- A growing library loan service that has 1,100 different titles of parenting materials such as books, curricula, audiotapes, and videotapes.
- ParentLink-developed catalogues listing expert-reviewed parenting curricula and materials. These catalogues include general parenting as well as special-population parenting: African American, Hispanic, Native American parents, parents of adolescents, and grandparents raising grandchildren. Expert panels of people from the culture or working with members of the culture reviewed these materials.
- Web sites reviewed and evaluated by a ParentLink-assembled team of experts.
- Consultants who provide their individual and collective wisdom through face-to-face meetings and through listserves. For example, twenty field and University experts provide in-kind support to ParentLink on topics pertaining to children with special health care needs.
- Informal contact with experts not in a formalized consultant bank. For example, a parent called about her child's delayed speech and wondered if it was related to her child being exposed to 3 dialects of Chinese. The ParentLink staff member called faculty at a communications disorders lab to better understand this situation and to ask for help in guiding her response to the question. The Department of Psychiatry supported ParentLink professionals in answering a question related to attention deficit disorder. Local and state agencies provide information as well. For example, a parent may call regarding his child's alcohol-related expulsion from school. On the mesosystem level, ParentLink professionals may contact the local public school to ascertain its substance abuse policy when a child abuses alcohol during a weekend camp out sponsored by a youth-serving organization. On the exosystem level, ParentLink staff may call the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to acquire information about state policies.

Problem-solving support

ParentLink professionals use a systems perspective to provide a holistic frame for supporting problem-solving efforts. Whether one-on-one with a parent, other caregiver, professional, or community group, ParentLink professionals sensitively facilitate discussion. They work to clarify the issue, develop a joint understanding of the ecosystem, assist in development of a plan, and then identify available resources whether those are from an individual, family, community, or the larger social system.

Community resource information

ParentLink uses a computerized listing of informal and formal programs/services available throughout the state. This is described more fully in the Community Connection section.

From the above information, we hope that it is evident that ParentLink is not a closed system. ParentLink is designed to encourage outside input to maximize the quality of the information that is, in turn, given to parents and professionals. Further, ParentLink works to promote communication among the micro-, meso-, and exosystem levels.

ParentLink delivery methods

ParentLink uses a variety of technologies to help parents, professionals, and community members to become aware of and effectively access these core services. Doorways to this information and support include a Parenting WarmLine, a Web site, media campaigns, the Community Connection, community development efforts, and neighborhood-based Parenting Corners. Descriptions of these program strategies are provided below. Although the descriptions are primarily based on practices that are already occurring, in some instances, we present our vision of what we hope will be accomplished in the near future.

Parenting WarmLine

Jack calls the ParentLink WarmLine and wants to know why his kids are such brats and what information they had to fix the problem. WarmLine staff offer Jack supportive conversation, sensitively probe for more information, and provide age- and stage-related information about children who are 6 months and two years of age. The professionals also discuss parenting strategies and safety measures to use with children of these ages. When asked if he would like to receive more information in the mail, Jack agrees that he is desperate and looking for all the help he can get. ParentLink professionals mail him a videotape from the ParentLink Lending Library on parenting strategies and child-proofing one's home. WarmLine staff also refer Jack to a home-visiting parenting education program that is available to all families in his community.

Since its opening in 1991, WarmLine professionals have proactively supported parents and professionals, helping them to address parenting-related issues. From the beginning, ParentLink's toll-free 1-800 number was marketed as a warm line distinguishing its preventive, proactive approach from that of a "hot line" designed for crisis callers. The WarmLine provides problem-solving support, research-based information, and referrals to other service providers. Parent calls range from questions about coping with a child's temper tantrums to dealing with a child who has attention deficit disorder.

Problem-solving support and case examples

ParentLink WarmLine professionals use a systems perspective to respond to callers' questions. They sensitively probe to obtain information about the individual's ecosystem and then identify resources that may be available from the individual, family, or larger social system. A systems perspective provides the holistic frame for understanding the caller and the problem of concern. But ParentLink professionals take that a step further and apply a specific theory appropriate for the call. Below are examples of calls and illustrations of how theories embedded within a systems perspective are used to provide effective responses.

A mother called because her 4-year-old had stolen a friend's toy and she worried that this was a precursor to future criminal activity. The WarmLine professional first established

an understanding of the child's environment and the extent to which the child was involved in taking others' things (systems perspective). By drawing from Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget, 1950) and Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Kohlberg, 1984), this professional helped the mother to understand that a 4-year-old child's self-centeredness does not allow him to see things from the perspectives of others. Thus, he does not yet have the capability to understand the injustice of such action.

A father, distressed about his 2-year-old son smearing feces on the bathroom walls, wondered if this behavior was indicative of a behavioral disorder. The ParentLink professional helped the parent to examine the family situation and child's pattern of behaviors (systems perspective). It was discovered that the grandmother was insistent that the son be potty trained at 2 years of age. To help meet the grandmother's goal, the child was being regularly forced to stay in the bathroom for 1 to 5 minutes every hour to use the potty. The ParentLink professional used Gesell's maturity traits and growth gradients (Gesell, Ilg, Ames, & Bullis, 1977) to guide her response and to explain about developmental expectations for that age regarding impulsive behavior and physiological readiness. Together, the parent and ParentLink professional concluded that the child was prematurely being urged to use the potty and that the child needed supervision. The child was still too young to understand the nature of feces and the implications of his actions.

A pregnant woman called crying about her recent discovery that her baby would be delivered through a Caesarean Section. She was painfully concerned that her child would not be securely attached if not fully lucid and able to hold her baby during the first few hours of recovery. ParentLink professionals probed to better understand the situation and to assess the parent's level of understanding about attachment (systems perspective). It was revealed that this was the mother's second child and that her first child had been recently diagnosed as autistic. Not knowing what had caused the autism, the mother felt responsible for not having created the necessary attachment for the child's healthy development. Because of the first child's outcome, she did not want to repeat it with the second. The ParentLink professional first helped the caller to understand what is currently known about autism, trying to alleviate her concerns about its origin being due to attachment and explaining rather that it is biologically related (Durand & Barlow, 1997). The professional then drew upon the attachment literature (Bowlby, 1969) to help the parent understand that attachment occurs over time and that it is not dependent on the period of time immediately following birth.

Professional use of WarmLine

Parents also access information from local professionals at the mesosystem level and, consequently, professionals are also encouraged to use the WarmLine to more effectively respond to parents' requests. Parents ask challenging questions of professionals, ranging from parenting educators to school and county health nurses to the local police, which may extend beyond their range of expertise. For example, a policeman who is stopped on the street and asked, "What am I to do with my bad-mouthing, obnoxious teenager?" may have a difficult time giving a developmentally-appropriate, research-based, facilitative response. But this policeman can call the ParentLink WarmLine for information and/or encourage the parent to call directly.

Media campaigns

While at the tavern, Jack sees a television public service announcement: *When You're Under the Influence, They're Under Yours*. When he gets to work, he sees a poster with this same caption. He begins to wonder about his drinking and its impact on his children. For more information, he calls ParentLink's WarmLine because he had found them to be helpful on an earlier call. Once again, he has an opportunity to problem solve over the phone, and learns more about his substance use and its impact on his family. He obtains materials to read and information about substance abuse counseling programs located in his community.

Since ParentLink was formed in 1989, coalition members and staff have believed that using the media is an important strategy to stimulate people's thinking about their parenting. Simpson (1997) supports this belief, stating that when the media is considered as a part of a complex set of factors, it can impact parenting behaviors. ParentLink's media messages have been derived from WarmLine data, community and coalition input, and the research-based literature. For the most part, ParentLink's public education efforts provide a proactive approach to educating parents and community members about certain parenting issues. In addition, WarmLine professionals equip themselves with the necessary resources to respond to anticipated calls emerging from an educational campaign. At that point, the WarmLine serves as a reactive service, where staff respond to questions and concerns raised by parents and professionals.

ParentLink educates the public about certain parenting issues by disseminating print pieces and airing radio and television public service announcements. To receive feedback from these efforts, ParentLink provides the public with its toll-free number to call for any parenting information or support.

For example, ParentLink recently created a media campaign entitled, *Be There for Your Teen*. The target audience for this campaign was parents of teenagers. To reach this targeted group, ParentLink developed public service announcements that were aired by radio and television stations. Professionals who work with parents also received packets of information that provided research-based information along with a "slick" fact sheet that could be reproduced for parents to use. The titles of other media campaigns that have been developed include: *When You're Under the Influence, They're Under Yours*; *Keep Paying Attention*; *Your Parenting Questions are as Unique as Your Children*; *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren*. Although ParentLink has a rich history of valuing, developing, and disseminating media campaigns, its efforts at full scale development and implementation have been hindered by a lack of consistent funding.

Community connection

Jack's concerns over his marital problems cause him to seek information about marriage counseling. He has learned from the WarmLine professionals that Community Connection exists on the World Wide Web and that he can independently explore for services. He goes to the public library to use its computer and Internet access. Jack calls up Community Connection on the computer, and enters in the desired county and words, "marriage counseling." Four different services surface that he thinks may meet their

needs. He prints out information about them. He also retrieves directions on how to drive to each of them.

Community Connection, first developed in 1993, emerged when a funder, familiar with ParentLink, suggested that we write a proposal to catalogue and computerize our service information. We seized this opportunity, realizing the great value of a computerized system to our WarmLine staff, as well as to numerous other groups.

Currently, WarmLine professionals use a ParentLink-developed internal computerized database of 7,000 records, each possessing information about a particular Missouri service. WarmLine professionals supply this information to callers seeking service information. This data set was compiled from the databases of multiple state agencies, as well as using data from county-level hard-copy directories. Although of extreme value, the database presents challenges for continual record updating.

To overcome this dilemma, Community Connection has entered a new phase of development. Now under the leadership of OSEDA (Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis) at the University of Missouri, Community Connection has emerged as a Web application. Now service providers can update their own information directly on the Web. In addition, patrons can independently find service information. Users can now print out information about desired services, and can also obtain a map with driving directions.

The Community Connection Web version exists today in an infancy state. To be fully functioning, service providers need to become more aware of its existence, find easy access to the Internet, and acquire the skills necessary to enter their data. Once fully populated with data from all service providers, the Web version of Community Connection will provide consumers with a wealth of valuable information. One additional challenge includes educating consumers about how to wisely select services.

Web site

When Jack's wife goes to work the next day, she obtains the ParentLink Web address from her ParentLink-promotional mouse pad and e-mails a question to the ParentLink WarmLine staff: "My family seems like it's falling apart. None of us are happy anymore. My kids, who are 2 years and 6 months, seem out of control and my husband and I don't seem to know what to do. To be frank, I don't know what to do with my husband. Sometimes I think he's the root of the problem. Any suggestions?" ParentLink professionals respond with a series of questions to probe for more information. Through e-mail, they clarify the problems to be addressed and then send information and recommend Web sites to review. In addition, Jack's wife is told how to hot link to the Community Connection Web site to obtain additional service information. They also encourage her to call or e-mail again.

General description

Our ParentLink's Web site (<http://outreach.missouri.edu/parentlink/>) provides Missouri parents, professionals, and community members another door to problem-solving support, research-based knowledge, and information on existing services. Our Web site is a work in progress and we will continue to expand and provide more information as it is developed. At present, we have the following site services:

WarmLine services on the web

At the ParentLink Web site, Missouri patrons can e-mail WarmLine staff and obtain problem-solving support similar to that received over our 1-800 telephone service. As with our 1-800 number, this e-mail service is designed to provide research-based information as opposed to therapeutic assistance. It also provides supportive dialogue over the Internet and provides links to educational and/or other sources of assistance and support.

Library loan service

ParentLink Web site visitors can also search our library loan materials by topic. Missourians can request that loan materials be mailed to them for a 30-day period. These materials are then sent to them free, although they are asked to pay return postage.

ParentLink curricula review guides

ParentLink has published multiple catalogues of expert-reviewed materials that target a variety of populations as discussed earlier. We now have two of the guides available through our Web site: Adolescent Connections: A Guide to Selecting Resource Materials for Parents of Adolescents and Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. These guides provide the reader with information about available materials for targeted audiences along with reviewers' comments. Materials that are reviewed favorably are available through e-mailing or calling ParentLink's WarmLine staff.

Through ParentLink's Web site, the user can obtain information about available lending library materials, curricula review guides, and hot links to other relevant sites that have been evaluated by a ParentLink review panel.

Media materials

We are now beginning to post our media materials on the Web so patrons can place orders from our Web site. We currently have materials from two different campaigns: Be There for Your Teen and Your Questions are as Unique as Your Children.

Hot links

Parentlink's Web site has a hot link to the Community Connection, which is a description of Missouri's services (as described earlier). We are also connected to ParentLink Coalition members who have Web sites. Soon, we will provide a listing of adolescent health Web sites that have been reviewed and recommended by a ParentLink-convened panel of experts. In the near future, we will also be linking to identified national organizations that provide support and services to families who have children with special needs.

Monthly electronic newsletter: What's new with ParentLink

ParentLink has also started a monthly electronic newsletter that updates professional audiences on new ParentLink activities and products. This newsletter is on the ParentLink Web site and is also e-mailed to a wide distribution list of Missouri family life educators, family service workers, health service providers, public school educators, and many others.

Parenting corners

That next morning, Jack went to run some errands at the shopping mall. He noticed a new kiosk, called “Parenting Corners.” A sign read, “free immunizations today—being offered by your local county health office.” Knowing that his children were overdue for their vaccinations, he approached the Corner. A volunteer greeted him and welcomed him to the Parenting Corner. She explained the services that were available, and asked how the Corner could be of help to him. He said that he would like his children immunized but was also interested in perusing the lending library and children's videos. While he used the Corner, his children played in the Kid Corner, equipped with building blocks and other suitable toys.

Parenting Corners will provide parents with neighborhood-based locations to access parenting support, research-based information, and service referrals. Through partnerships with other agencies, we also plan to provide opportunities for obtaining on-site services. Our vision is to have Parenting Corners throughout the state and located wherever parents frequent. Even though they will be in many shapes and sizes, they will be easily identified by their color scheme and the “Parenting Corner” logo.

Parenting Corners will provide customers with problem-solving support by offering access to: (a) ParentLink's WarmLine Professionals; (b) ParentLink's Web site that will allow the customer to e-mail a message to ParentLink; and (c) on-site staff and/or volunteers. To offer research-based information, Parenting Corners may provide a lending library or access to ParentLink's resource materials through the WarmLine or the Web site. Service information will be obtained by either calling the WarmLine or using the Community Connection Web application (as described earlier).

In some instances, agency partners will provide small-scale services at the Parenting Corner. For example, the local health department may offer immunizations, a child care specialist might consult with parents on how to select appropriate child care, or a parenting educator may offer hands-on opportunities to create home-made toys. In other instances, Parenting Corners will be placed where the service is regularly provided. For example, a Parenting Corner could be found at the local health department, a medical clinic, or a hospital. It could also be located at offices such as University Extension or agencies offering family support services. In fact, the prison system has expressed interest in a Parenting Corner to be used by prison inmates.

Presently, a grant from a Missouri state agency is allowing us to pilot Parenting Corners in four Missouri communities. Each of these Parenting Corners will follow certain standards. For example, they are to use a retail model, each carrying the same bold color scheme, logo, and headings. They are to be prominently placed and will have visual appeal. Materials offered are to be selected from a subset of books, audiotapes, and videotapes that have been recommended by ParentLink review committees. Patrons will be able to access a telephone or computer that allows them to contact ParentLink's WarmLine or other needed service. The Parenting Corners

can be set up to provide materials for a wide audience range or they can be theme-based (e.g., focussing on fathers or parents of newborns).

Although communities are asked to meet certain standards, ParentLink facilitates and supports communities to customize the Parenting Corner concept to fit their needs. For example, one small community has developed a large 7 foot tall semi-portable display that moves among 4 community sites: the public school, the bank, a child care center, and city hall. Each of these 4 sites has a telephone to provide the customer with a direct connection to the ParentLink WarmLine so, in the absence of the Corner, he or she can still access the WarmLine. A larger community has chosen to have 2 table-top portable display units that will move among various community events. Seven agencies within this community will have table-top or bulletin board displays in their agencies. The largest Parenting Corner is currently being planned for a busy mall in central Missouri, whose peak traffic reaches 100,000 people per day.

As we work with communities, we attempt to design Parenting Corners so that additional local staff do not have to be hired. In one community, the local agency partners are integrating Parenting Corner responsibilities into their regular staff duties. We are also considering designing the mall version to be available to the public with or without staff.

A rough cost estimate for these models is a range from \$500 to \$100,000 depending on the structure's size, the number of materials displayed, the need for rental space, and use of staff. The costs would be greater if one would also include the expenses incurred by ParentLink for community training and core services (such as WarmLine staff, 1-800 phone charges, mailing expenses, etc.).

The concept of Parenting Corners has been emerging over the past few years as the ParentLink Coalition and staff have worked to develop a decentralized strategy for helping parents to easily access parenting information. Through exchanges with Western Australia colleagues who are creating mall-based and other models of Parenting Information Centers throughout their state, we have gained extensive knowledge of what does and does not work and have moved more toward a retail version of a Parenting Corner model.

Community development

According to data gathered by ParentLink and corroborating data, Jack is a member of one of many families who face challenging issues around work and family balance, need for affordable and quality child care, and awareness of available parenting education programs. A local community group agrees that these are problems needing to be addressed locally. As a result, the local community more carefully studies the problems and then develops and implements a plan of action.

ParentLink works to empower communities to enhance their parenting and family support efforts. Communities are approached as systems that have boundaries, some more permeable than others. The goal is to support communities in receiving and effectively utilizing input from outside their system and, conversely, for communities to effectively provide feedback about what is occurring within their system.

To accomplish this, local gatekeepers are identified through a key informant methodology. ParentLink staff work to build trusting relationships with these gatekeepers, who in turn already have trusting affiliations with their community members. These leaders then work to bridge the exosystem with the meso- and micro-levels. This relationship between ParentLink and the gatekeeper is designed to create a feedback loop. Specifically, gatekeepers will take information into the community, make use of this information with community members, gather community data, and release them back to ParentLink for further analysis. ParentLink, along with community representatives, then will use this community information in conjunction with other statewide data to help shape internal as well as external programs and/or policies.

Gatekeepers take information into their communities through a coalition that is a cross-section of the micro- and meso-level entities. Coalition members include people such as parents, youth, grandparents, religious leaders, school teachers, school administrators, city staff, and local health officials. The gatekeeper (with ParentLink's support) facilitates coalition meetings, assisting the membership to take a birds-eye view of the current level of family support activities, imagining what could be, and then developing a plan of action for moving from current to desired level of activity (Lofquist, 1989). Community members are then engaged in a process to problem solve, to develop and implement an action plan, and conduct an ongoing evaluation to assess process and outcomes.

This plan may surface a need for child care, family-friendly employer policies, parenting education programs, mentoring programs, and the like. Based on what emerges from the coalition's problem-solving approach, a more specific theory may be applicable. For example, if the need for parent-child communication surfaces, a local committee may promote an Adlerian-based curriculum designed for parents.

ParentLink's role is to support communities in moving from gatekeeper identification to action plan development, implementation, and evaluation. Our role is also to retrieve information that will be analyzed and integrated into statewide data that will support efforts at program and policy development. ParentLink's role is to help communities consider their local resources as well as to help them identify and secure additional resources (people, material, and electronic) that may come from outside of their local system. As ParentLink learns more from community members, staff, and coalition members, it can be more informed about needed programs and policies.

Over the past ten years, ParentLink has used two different methods for carrying out these community development activities, with a third method in development.

Regional or statewide conferences

Over 100 community groups have attended ParentLink's regional or statewide conferences designed to support planning and implementation of local parenting-support efforts. Conference design promotes in-depth planning, but also provides educational enrichment on various topics. Research may be shared and curricula showcased. In addition, conferences are designed to maximize cross-community sharing. Community plans have differed widely and have included ideas such as mentoring programs for teen mothers and substance abuse prevention programming. An upcoming conference is being made available to communities that identified a

need to offer support to parents of adolescents. Interested communities have self-identified in response to ParentLink's electronic newsletter. They will attend our conference, gain additional information about related research such as adolescent risk and protective factors, and discover more about how parents can effectively support their children's development. They will then create a plan and a proposal that they will submit to us for possible funding. A Missouri state agency is making this conference and community funding available.

This model allows ParentLink to efficiently reach many communities simultaneously. It is also much more cost effective in that we can provide higher quality educational enrichment. It is our belief, though, that it is less programmatically effective than on-site work because we have to encourage communities to work at a pace that fits into the conference agenda, it is much more challenging to identify the community gatekeepers, and it is more difficult to provide communities with individualized support.

Local community meetings

In more recent years, ParentLink has focussed on providing on-site facilitation and technical assistance to local communities, helping them move through a community development model to build local programs of support for parents. For each of the next three years, we are targeting ten communities that are high in poverty, have a small population, and have little existing collaborative support. Our emphasis is on building a local comprehensive support plan for families. Representatives from these communities will come together annually to share their progress with each other. In addition, an emerging Web site will provide them with a forum to share with one another electronically. An advisory group of 15 professionals from a variety of agencies and who have expertise in community development processes and family issues meets monthly to provide guidance to the emergence of this project.

Web application

An emerging third method for assisting communities will be a Web application designed as a self-help guide to support communities in using a community development model to support families. This Web feature will provide community development tools helpful to establishing and maintaining local coalitions, assessing local needs, identifying research-based information related to the causes of identified problems, effective policies and programs that address local needs, evaluation tools, and much more. It will also provide communities with a forum for dialoguing with one another as well as providing input about community needs and community activities.

Bringing it all together: feedback guides policy and program planning

ParentLink continually strives to more effectively use parent, professional, and community feedback to guide policy and program planning. Information and support needed for children and families will be determined by analyzing information received from parents and community members, and consulting the research literature. Specifically, this information will surface through an analysis of WarmLine calls, community action planning, and data sets such as Kids Count. It will then be substantiated with findings from the research literature. This information will then be presented to the ParentLink Coalition that represents numerous statewide and community sectors. The ParentLink Coalition members will take action to see that programs and

policies are adjusted or created to address the issues at hand. Coalition members may take action unilaterally within their own agency to shape programs or policies, they may see a need to advocate to other groups for desired changes, or they may work to create a new effort. As new/adjusted programs and policies are established, it is then hoped that problems will be addressed and continually monitored, as a part of an information feedback loop. Then, additional problems are addressed as resources permit.

Challenges and difficulties working with an open, permeable family support system

After nearly ten years of building the ParentLink structure, staff and coalition members are proactively capitalizing on the power of this holistic system to let the information and support efforts flow and respond to expressed needs of parents and families. Nevertheless, we have found that the benefits of developing an open and permeable system are accompanied by numerous challenges and difficulties. We present some of the most salient of these challenges for the benefit of those who may consider developing a similar system.

First, administrators of open and permeable systems have relatively less control than do administrators of more hierarchical, “top-down” programs. For example, the ParentLink coalition has reached decisions about program activities that have been somewhat different than originally proposed by ParentLink staff. Any potential staff frustration is tempered by the understanding that a collective of professionals from multiple disciplines and with diverse ideas brings a richness to the decision-making process. Administrators who adopt a similar structure need to be prepared to accept that the program may move in unanticipated, but hopefully sound directions.

Second, ParentLink staff have the responsibility of providing coalition members with good, representative, and balanced information. Of course, staff always have this responsibility when interfacing with an advisory or governing board. However, we believe that, because coalition members have been empowered with greater decision-making authority than is typically the case for advisory boards, even more time may need to be spent in finding and presenting relevant information necessary for sound decision making.

Third, being relatively “dependent” on a coalition of professionals brings with it the cost of frequent transition. For example, although agency and organizational representation is fairly steady, the specific individuals participating change from time to time. In addition, because being a coalition member is only one of these individuals' many responsibilities, it is sometimes difficult to secure consistent attendance at coalition meetings. For these reasons, administrators of permeable and open systems like ParentLink need to realize that they may be working with very different groups, with quite different dynamics, from meeting to meeting.

Fourth, ParentLink is currently housed with University Extension and is, therefore, affiliated with the University. While a university affiliation brings with it the advantages of greater credibility in some circles, more extensive resources, and closer ties with the academic roots underlying parent and family support programs, such an affiliation also bears some costs. Some individuals may feel that programs developed and managed in a university are targeted primarily to families in the middle- and upper-socioeconomic strata and that they are not likely to be sensitive to the majority of families that are not so advantaged. Others may feel that university

faculty and staff, even those in Extension, have had less experience directly working with families than have professionals in non-university agencies. Still others may feel that the university is characterized by exorbitant amounts of bureaucracy and cost (e.g., what are perceived as high indirect cost rates). For these and other reasons, some potential partners may have some reluctance to collaborate with university-connected programs or entities.

Fifth, although evaluation provides an essential feedback loop to programs such as ParentLink, it has been difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of ParentLink's services in a manner that is credible to all relevant constituencies. To date, we have conducted evaluations of the WarmLine every 2 to 3 years by randomly selecting callers who have previously agreed to participate in an evaluation study. A non-ParentLink affiliated evaluator calls participants to determine the impact that ParentLink has had on their parenting behaviors, as well as to assess their satisfaction with services. Not surprisingly, given that consumer satisfaction surveys generally yield positive results, our data have shown that participants highly rate the effectiveness of the WarmLine service. In addition, we also continuously track the frequency of calls and the proportion of callers who are “return” callers. In the past few years, we have received 2,500–3,000 calls per year, a number which has increased over time, with approximately 50% from parents and other direct caregivers and 50% from professionals. About 40% of our callers are return callers. While these data are encouraging, we recognize that we have not had the resources to conduct a long-term impact study of the effectiveness of ParentLink's services.

Finally, there are the ever-present financial challenges. ParentLink is only partially funded by “hard” money and, thus, is dependent on external funding. As a result, searching for funding opportunities, grant-writing, discussions and negotiations with funders, and meeting externally imposed time deadlines are routine activities that might be perceived as taking time and energy away from the work of supporting families. On the other hand, this tends to focus staff energy and time, resulting in high productivity. The desire to obtain future financial resources from a funder provides an added incentive for ensuring high quality performance. The necessity of having to be responsive to the program priorities of external funding sources may affect the specific programs that ParentLink develops (e.g., a program entitled When You're Under the Influence was developed in response to a child abuse prevention initiative from an outside agency), but does not change the underlying systemic process described in this article.

Future directions

In conclusion, we provide some thoughts about future directions for ParentLink. First, we plan on fully implementing the model depicted in this article. While most of the components are currently in place, some elements need to be more fully developed and a greater integration of the various program features needs to be achieved. For example, while coalition members are provided with some data regarding calls to the WarmLine, we need to develop and implement a more systematic process of providing this information, identifying the program implications of the data, and generating revised programmatic directions based on this analysis. Second, we plan on conducting process and outcome evaluations of each program component and of the entire system in the near future. Finally, because long-term planning is conducted most effectively in a secure and stable environment, we are continuing to seek more permanent funding.

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