FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Critical Skills for Families Facing Serious Parenting Challenges
A Basic Parenting Skills Online Course

Course Guidebook

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Contents

Background

Purpose of Program

To provide a self-directed, online educational program for court-involved parents or other parents in risk situations who could benefit from learning basic parenting skills. The primary goal is to minimize the risk of child maltreatment while optimizing child developmental outcomes. The course may be voluntary, recommended, or mandated by courts or other professionals.

Program Creator and Sponsor

The creator of the program is Judith A. Myers-Walls, Ph.D., Certified Family Life Educator. She has a Ph.D. in Child Development and Family Studies and over 35 years of experience in creating, delivering, and evaluating programs for parents and families. Most of her experience has been with the Cooperative Extension system, primarily in Indiana at Purdue University. She has written or edited 3 books, over 20 book chapters, over 30 peer-reviewed journal articles, approximately 40 Extension publications, and more than 15 curriculum packages.

The sponsor of this program is OnlineParentingPrograms.com, which offers tools to courts and other professionals that can strengthen the commitment to providing innovative program solutions to help children and families facing challenges. The

company is headed by Michelle Muncy, who brings more than 20 years of experience in marketing and design to her role as Planning Director and by Victor Vacaretu, who brings more than 15 years of technology experience to his role of Chief Technology Officer.

The company has been delivering online courses since 2009 and has reached over 60,000 parents, who have achieved an 87% completion rate.

Program Orientation/Theoretical Base
This program is organized around the National Extension Parent Education Model (NEPEM; http://www.k-state.edu/wwparent/nepem/) and based on the following theories:

- *Family Systems Theory:* What happens to one person in the family impacts all family members, and any actions or behaviors by any family member will reflect and be reflected by other family members.
- *Human Ecology Theory:* Families live in an environment of nested layers of influence ranging from the individual to the family to the global context. It is important to take those contexts into account when determining the causes of behavior and making recommendations for changes.
- *Developmental/Maturational Theories:* Children's (and adults') needs and abilities are determined to a large extent by their developmental or maturational level. It is important to build expectations for children's behavior based on that developmental level; adults can also facilitate and encourage children's movement to higher levels of development over time.
- *Attachment Theory.* Humans require close relationships with other humans in order to develop optimally. Both children and adults benefit from secure attachments, and both can suffer if close attachments are lost.)
- *Cognitive-Behavioral Educational Theory:* Participants will learn best when they connect their feelings and thinking with their behavior. Behavior change is based on conscious decisions and the practicing of skills.

Specific theoretical citations used in individual units are provided under Sources in the curriculum outline.

The following publications provided overall guidance and criteria regarding quality online parenting education:

Hughes, R., Jr., Bowers, J. R., Mitchell, E. T., Curtiss, S., & Ebata, A. (2012). Developing online family life prevention and education programs. *Family Relations, 61,* 711-727.).

Myers-Walls, J. A., & Dworkin, J. (2016). Parenting education without borders: Web-based outreach. In J. J. Ponzetti (Ed.), *Evidence-based parenting education: A global perspective* (pp. 123-139). New York: Routledge.

Myers-Walls, J. A. (2012). Court-mandated parents and families. In A. Taylor and S. Ballard (Eds.). *Family life education with diverse populations* (pp. 61-90). Newbury Park: Sage.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009). *Parent training Programs: insight for Practitioners*. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/parent_training_brief-a.pdf.

Target Audience

This program is designed for parents of children aged birth to 18 who could benefit from training in basic parenting skills. The program specifically targets parents who are at risk or who are involved in the child welfare or court systems in some way. Some modules are designed for any parent facing challenges and risks. Other components are targeted more specifically to particular groups of parents, such as parents who have been or could be identified as abusive and/or neglectful or grandparents or other relatives raising children. Specific attempts have been made to include:

- Both male and female parents and parenting figures. Although there are many references to mothers and fathers, attempts were made to make the materials applicable to same-sex couples as well.
- Married, never-married, remarried, divorced, cohabiting, and widowed parents. The program encourages co-parenting among all available and known parents and parenting figures but defines when it is appropriate to limit contact with a parent who is not safe.
- Biological parents, adoptive parents, and guardians, including grandparents and other relatives raising children.
- Parents of children with special needs.
- Information is provided for identifying child abuse and neglect and domestic violence. Some information is also provided regarding the impacts of substance abuse or mental illness. Basic guidelines are provided for those situations, but it is critical that additional services be provided by professionals in those fields to deal with the underlying problems.

NOTE: This program is NOT appropriate as a primary intervention for families involved in or at risk for sexual abuse of children. No educational programs have been shown to be effective with meeting the most pressing needs of this population. Instead, therapeutic approaches and careful management of parent-child contact are more effective. This program might be helpful as a supplement to that therapeutic help.

The program will be most successful for participants who:

- Have access to enough resources to meet their own and their children's basic needs. That means, if they do not have a home (or at least temporary shelter) or enough food or other basic necessities, those needs should be met first so that the participants can concentrate on parenting. Such families may benefit from this program later and sometimes simultaneously with the meeting of those basic needs.

- Have some contact with their children; that is, their children live with them, or the parents have regular contact with the children who may be living with another parent or family member or be in a foster situation. It is possible to benefit from the program without regular contact, but the learning will be less effective, because participants will not have a chance to practice the skills while taking the course.
- Are mentally stable enough to participate in a psychoeducational experience. That is, they are in touch with reality enough to care for their children and are not currently a danger to themselves or their children.
- Are literate at the fourth- or fifth-grade reading level or higher (English or Spanish) and competent with basic computer skills and have access to an Internet-connected device, or they can partner with someone who will assist with reading and/or managing the online connections.
- Are provided with enough time to complete the program, practice the skills, and reflect on insights and ideas in between sessions.

Special Characteristics of the Program
- The reading level is between 4th- and 5th-grade levels throughout the course.
- Activities and frequent opportunities to reflect on and process the materials are included in each unit. We ask participants to assess their situation and set goals at multiple points in the curriculum. Such an approach simulates some of the characteristics of face-to-face programming.
- Sections called Children's Time are dispersed throughout the program. These are opportunities to build on the topics that were covered in the parent sections just before the Children's Time appears. They guide parents or guardians in play and learning activities with children of different ages. This is a method to apply research that shows that the most effective programs include children.
- A positive, strengths-based focus characterizes the materials. We believe that participants are more likely to make changes and feel confident about their ability to provide a positive atmosphere for their children if the materials help them identify and build on their strengths rather than reminding them of their failures. Although we provide some information about dangers and risks, we try to help participants to find the resources that exist in themselves and their environment that will help them make positive outcomes more likely for themselves and their children.
- Language has been examined for cultural inclusivity.
- Participants are given hints for what to look for in videos and other special presentations. This lowers the likelihood of parents becoming passive recipients of the information. They also answer questions after most videos to reflect on how they will use the information.

Characteristics of the Program Focused on Families Facing Challenges

Foundations for the Future was designed as a tool to prevent child abuse and neglect at the secondary (for families judged to be at special risk) or tertiary (for families with a demonstrated history) levels. Based on a meta-analysis done by the U. S. Dept. of Health and Human Services (2009), there are three primary aspects of programs that have been shown to be effective in preventing child abuse and neglect:

- Teaching parents emotion communication skills.
- Teaching parents effective parent-child interactions skills.
- Requiring parents to practice with their children during program sessions.

In response to those findings, we have infused emotion language throughout the program, including in the development section, in the discipline section, in the section on needs, and in the stress section. We also have included many activities and references to parent-child relationships throughout the program in each unit, including references to the parents' relationships with their own parents.

Although this is an online program, we also have included practice with the children throughout the units by incorporating a Children's Time component, after which participants are expected to complete a feedback form. Caseworkers, judges, other court personnel, mediators, and others could use the feedback forms to obtain feedback and then counsel with the parents. It is also possible that the online program could be used in tandem with a face-to-face "baby-and-me" type of programs in which the parents would complete the parent-focused programming on their own and then meet with a group to practice some of the child activities and get direct feedback from leaders and other participants. It should be noted, however, that the activities with older children may be most effective in a private, one-on-one setting.

Additional features of the *Foundations for the Future* program that are responsive to other literature related to families facing serious parenting challenges:

Research Literature Findings	*Foundations for the Future Response*
Common concerns for abusive and neglectful parents are inappropriate developmental expectations, high levels of stress, harsh punishment, and a history of poor parenting.	These topics helped to guide the choice of topics for the series.
Many families in challenging situations repeat dysfunction from previous generations.	Families are facilitated in examining their past and encouraged and instructed in how to make new and fresh decisions.
Low self-esteem is often associated with neglect.	Strategies are provided for self-praise and increasing parenting self-confidence.

Physical punishment is associated with escalation to physical abuse.	Alternatives are provided to physical punishment and stress management techniques are taught.
Many parents in risk situations do not know how to play with their children and see parenting as a chore.	Children's Time activities provide play ideas and encourage parents to join in. Statements often mention having fun with children.
Cultural difference is sometimes seen as neglect.	Parents are encouraged to examine their backgrounds and learn to express their cultural heritage appropriately.
Many parents enter mandated or recommended programs in a resentful or angry manner.	Attempts are made to connect with the parents, normalize parenting concerns, and provide success experiences early.
Some neglectful parents do not have adequate resources.	Ideas are provided for locating and accessing resources and sharing resources with others.
High levels of stress are the major reason for many families being screened into service programs.	An entire unit is devoted to stress management in both children and parents.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009). *Parent training Programs: insight for Practitioners*. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/parent_training_brief-a.pdf.

Availability of the Program for Review

All courses will be available for review online. Contact OnlineParentingPrograms.com to obtain administrative access for reviewing the courses. There is no instructor manual, because the course is self-directed. Videos and other learning materials can be seen online. Handouts corresponding to each module will be provided for downloading and/or printing throughout the course.

Course Learning Objectives

Primary Objectives
Foundations for the Future is based on the concepts and conclusions from a review of the research literature on parenting education conducted by the group that developed NEPEM (see p. 3) and the U. S, Department of Health and Human Services (see p. 4). Those materials lead to the following primary objectives:

As a result of participating in this program, compared to their feelings and behavior before participating, parents will…

1. Report more effective and frequent communication with their children about emotions.
2. Report and demonstrate more positive interaction skills with their children and more positive stress-management techniques with self and children.
3. Report and demonstrate more developmentally appropriate expectations and interactions with their children.
4. Report and demonstrate more consistency when interacting with and responding to their children.
5. Report and demonstrate using positive and effective discipline methods with their children.
6. Report greater self-confidence and satisfaction with parenting.

Specific objectives are provided for each unit.

Content Outline

Welcome Section—This section includes a discussion of reactions to being recommended or mandated to participate in this program. It also includes guidelines and instructions for using the program. This section is not timed.

Three types of content units or modules will be offered.
1. **Core course.** Together these six units provide basic parenting background and skills that have been identified in the National Extension Parent Education Model (NEPEM (see http://www.k-state.edu/wwparent/nepem/nepem.pdf, especially page 14). It is expected that most participants will complete this core course before participating in more specific modules. *Completed units:*
   a. **Core Unit 1: Who Are You as a Parent?** Includes: Parental rights and responsibilities, Learning from your parents, Caring for yourself as a parent, Parenting Values.
   b. **Core Unit 2: Understanding Growing Children.** Includes: Overview of development, Areas of development and sensitive periods, Problems in children's development, Adult development, Individual differences, Your child's doctor and assessing development.
   c. **Core Unit 3: Guiding Children.** Includes: Discipline and punishment; Right, wrong, and morals; Setting rules and limits; Outcomes for following rules or breaking them, Pulling it all together
   d. **Core Unit 4: What Children Need.** Includes: What children need and children's rights; When there isn't enough to go around; Most important— Children need you! (attachment); Problems in attachment; Keeping children healthy.

  e. **Core Unit 5: Children and Learning**. Includes: Stress and parenting; Why should we care about stress?; When stress becomes trauma; Understanding stress; Where does stress com from?; Managing stress; Don't pass it on; When stress is too much

  f. **Core Unit 6: Parenting and Stress.** Partially complete.

2. **Audience-specific units:** (All of these are still under development) The basic content units in the Core Course address all parenting situations and all age groups in a general way. One audience-specific unit and one child age-group unit may be chosen to accompany each administration of the Core Course. These units will address the particular issues, concerns, and recommendations that fit that group. A questionnaire helps parents or professionals chose the audience-specific units that best fit their situation. Additional units can be added for an additional fee.

  a. **Parent groups.** These units are aimed at specific parenting groups. They highlight specific strengths, challenges, and strategies that apply to each group. Planned units include:

   i. Parents identified as or at risk of being abusive and/or neglectful

   ii. Parents with children in or at risk of being involved with the Juvenile Justice System

   iii. Grandparents or other relatives raising children

   iv. Parents of children with special needs

   v. Parents facing substance abuse in parents or children

  b. **Child age groups.** These units are designed for parents or caregivers of children in specific age groupings. The Core Course will be applicable to children of all ages, but these modules will focus on issues and techniques that are particular to smaller age groupings. Planned modules include:

   i. Infants and toddlers (birth-2)

   ii. Preschoolers (3-5)

   iii. School-age children (6-12)

   iv. Teenagers (13-18)

   v. Children with special needs

3. **Topic Modules.** These modules address particular topics that may apply or be of interest to only some participants. They could stand alone, but many would be more effective if the participants complete the Core Course first.

  a. **Managing Resources.** Includes: Setting priorities, Managing time, Managing space, Managing money. Under final development.

  b. **Cooperating with Parenting Partners.** Includes: Working with close parenting partners, Managing conflict with close partners, Working with a community of parents. Under final development.

Each unit or module begins with a pre-unit or module assessment (multiple-choice questions) and an introduction to the unit or modules that includes some description of

the importance of the topics covered and a list of objectives (What You Will Learn). All units or modules include text, videos, narrated slide presentations, links to outside sources, Children's Time, handouts to be downloaded or printed, and reflective journal entries that must be completed by the participant in order to advance. Each ends with a post-unit or module assessment that includes the same questions as the pre-assessment along with formative evaluation questions. Participants must provide the correct answers to the content-based items to be allowed to move forward. Correct answers are explained after users have a chance to respond. Other items do not have right-or-wrong answers but instead assess attitudes and personal behavior or experiences. Final elements in each unit or module are additional resources that might be helpful for anyone wanting more information on the topics along with the sources that were used.

Unique modules and new units or modules may be developed for an individual county or jurisdiction, with the understanding that some time will be required for development and that priority will be given to those programs that are relevant to the largest or most underserved potential audiences. Any users may suggest new or additional topics at any time, and those suggestions will be taken into consideration as program development decisions are made.

Evaluation Plan

The overall course **outcome evaluation plan** will include the following items:
1) demographic and background forms collected the first time the parents enroll,
2) pre- and post-assessment items collected before and after each unit or module; and
3) some journal entries. Those data will be analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The results will be used to improve the program and also will be distributed in professional journals and at conferences to contribute to the field.

Formative evaluation data will be collected by way of a brief questionnaire at the end of each module. The information will be used to correct problems and improve the delivery of the program.