

Advancing the field of parenting education.

By Debbie Glasser and Harriet Heath

Recent research and media attention have brought to the public's awareness what child welfare advocates have known for years. Parents are critically important in supporting the well being of their children by shaping how they develop and who they become. Whether the "parent" is a biological parent, adoptive parent, legal guardian, foster parent, custodial grandparent, or any other person who made a long term commitment to a child and has primary responsibility for raising that child, the message remains the same: Parents matter.

Parents matter throughout a child's life. The National Academy of Sciences seminal report, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, examined the research on early childhood development and found that healthy development depends on nurturing and dependable relationships during the early years. And Rae Simpson's 2001 report on parenting adolescents, *Raising Teens*, discovered "an unprecedented body of research...about the powerful ways in which parents and families make a difference in the lives of teens."

Parents simply matter.

From Neurons to Neighborhoods also put to rest the "nature-nurture" debate. Research clearly shows that while children are born with a unique genetic makeup and temperament, how genes get expressed, what connections in the brain are made, strengthened or lost, all depend on a child's experience which is primarily with his or her parents. The fact is, how parents respond to and interact with their child has great influence on all areas of his or her development including mental health, academic achievement, self-esteem, behavior and social competence.

Raising a healthy, thriving child is an awesome responsibility that most parents face with little information or support. Most receive no parenting education. Family and friends may live far away. Many children and families experience significant economic hardships. In addition, the challenges parents face in 2004 are typically quite different than those experienced by parents of previous generations.

Many parents feel overwhelmed and isolated. In his 1996 study of the parenting education movement, Nick Carter concluded that the belief of twentieth century parents is, "Everybody needs help." Carter said parents are looking for "specific child-rearing information and advice...and emotional support."

As a result, according to Carter, "Hundreds of grassroots parenting programs began popping up across the country." By mid-1990, there were over 50,000 parenting programs in the United States, reaching millions of parents and caregivers. Carter characterized these programs as:

- Representing a variety of disciplines and orientations. For example, teachers design programs for parents to promote children's school readiness. Physicians run classes for parents to help improve their children's compliance with medical treatments. Parents create programs for other parents wishing to improve their breastfeeding success. And

psychologists develop curricula promoting behavioral guidance techniques. The result is a plethora of programs scattered across a variety of professional fields, schools, offices and neighborhood community centers.

- Lacking consistent, professional standards for parenting education content and leadership. When one program focuses on childhood nutrition and another on discipline techniques, there is little agreement as to the content of parenting education programs. Similarly, when a neighborhood parent leads one program and a Ph.D. in human development leads the other, there is little consensus as to the qualifications of parenting educators.

The National Parenting Education Network (NPEN) was created to address these issues. As an umbrella organization it welcomes parenting educators from all fields and disciplines. Through its listserv and website, NPEN provides opportunities for individuals from all professional groups as well as interested parents to connect and network in a virtual meeting place.

In an effort to further link the diverse group of parent educators, NPEN's council has developed a set of core principles around which all those working in the field can gather, regardless of their professional training (or lack thereof). These core principles define who parents are, what is expected of them, their need for information, skills and support, and the role of the parenting educator.

To make these principles as universal and relevant as possible for all parenting experiences and parenting education activities, and to form a common foundation for our work, NPEN is seeking input from parent educators. Please review these core principles and share your feedback. Ask questions. Make recommendations. Help shape the principles that can guide the work and define the role of all parent educators. NPEN's working draft of Core Principles for Parenting Education is posted on: www.npen.org Please send comments and feedback to Debbie Glasser at: glasser@nova.edu

Parents have tremendous influence in the lives of their children. They are seeking information and support in record numbers. And there have never been more programs available to parents than now.

The National Parenting Education Network (NPEN) is committed to identifying these diverse programs and helping make them more accessible to parents who are committed to the well being of their children and entitled to information and support in their most important role.

Debbie Glasser, Ph.D. is Chair of the National Parenting Education Network, and Director of Family Support Services at the Mailman Segal Institute for Early Childhood Studies at Nova Southeastern University in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

Harriet Heath, Ph.D. is the former Chair of the National Parenting Education Network, and Director of the Parent Center at the Thorne School and Child Study Institute at Bryn Mawr College in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania.