Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Parents who understand the usual course of child development are more likely to be able to provide their children with respectful communication, consistent rules and expectations, developmentally appropriate limits, and opportunities that promote independence. But no parent can be an expert on all aspects of infant, child, and teenage development or on the most effective ways to support a child at each stage. When parents are not aware of normal developmental milestones, interpret their child’s behaviors in a negative way, or do not know how to respond to and effectively manage a child’s behavior, they can become frustrated and may resort to harsh discipline.

As children grow, parents need to continue to foster their parenting competencies by learning about and responding to children’s emerging needs. Information about child development and parenting may come from many sources, including extended families, cultural practices, media, formal parent education classes, or a positive school environment that supports parents. Interacting with other children of similar ages also helps parents better understand their own child. Observing other caregivers who use positive techniques for managing children’s behavior provides an opportunity for parents to learn healthy alternatives.

Parenting styles need to be adjusted for each child’s unique temperament and circumstances. Parents of children with special needs may benefit from additional coaching and support to reduce frustration and help them become the parents their children need.

How Workers Can Help

- Encourage parents to see the world from their child’s point of view. For example, you might explore a room together on hands and knees, to help a parent understand how to childproof for their toddler.
- Talk with parents about what children can typically do at different ages. Discuss any concerns about what their child can or cannot do. Family-friendly information about developmental milestones from 2 months to 5 years can be found on the CDC website at http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html.
- Encourage parents to join a parenting group or class where they can share and learn new parenting strategies.

Words to live by: Being a great parent is part natural and part learned.
How Programs Can Help

• Offer informal, daily interactions between parents and program staff, plus coaching from staff on specific developmental challenges when they arise (e.g., inconsolable crying, eating or sleeping problems, biting, sharing toys, lying, problems with peers).

• Educate staff on parenting and child development so that they can play a more effective role in coaching parents on these issues.

• Provide parent-child interaction training opportunities through classes or workshops that address topics parents request or that respond to current issues.

• Provide observation opportunities, such as video monitors or windows into classrooms and outdoor space, where parents can watch their child interacting with other children and learn new techniques by observing staff.

• Give parents opportunities to participate in conversations with other parents about their own experiences as children and how they want to change their parenting.

• Offer a lending library of educational materials about parenting and child development.

CBCAP State Example: Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention

The Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention and CBCAP program fund United Cerebral Palsy of Huntsville and Tennessee Valley’s Family Connections to provide parent support groups and training in child development and parenting skills. The Family Connections program teaches parenting skills that build upon the protective factors known to reduce the likelihood of child maltreatment. Participating parents learn behavior modification strategies, realistic developmental expectations, tools for managing stressful situations, and more.

The Family Connections program also incorporates parent-child classes, known as Family Fun Times, for children ages 18 months to 5 years. These monthly gatherings promote parent-child bonding through fun activities, such as art, stories, music, and movement. Family Fun Times also serve as an opportunity for the Parent Educator to model activities and strategies that parents can use to encourage their child’s development. In addition, the parent-child classes include a segment of free play to allow time for the parents to socialize and learn from one another, which helps build a social support system among the families.

For more information:

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