A Capacity-Building Approach to Parenting Education

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ABSTRACT

The capacity-building model described in this *CASEinPoint* was used to plan and implement a parenting education program designed to support and strengthen parenting competence and confidence. Findings indicated that parent participation in the program improved parenting confidence and competence when program activities were interest- and asset-based, provided parents participatory learning opportunities, and parents had opportunities to reflect on their successful use of self-identified parenting strategies. Implications for improving parenting education practices are described.

INTRODUCTION

This *CASEinPoint* includes a description of a capacity-building model that was used to develop and implement an approach to parenting education and support called the *Parenting Club*. The *Parenting Club* was implemented at the Family, Infant and Preschool Program (FIPP) in Morganton, NC. FIPP is an early childhood and family support program that provides supports and resources to children birth to eight years of age and their families (www.fipp.org).

The *Parenting Club* was implemented in two different FIPP Family Resource Centers located in rural communities in western North Carolina. Both centers had a family-friendly atmosphere and offered parents a variety of learning opportunities and experiences. Participants met once a week for 6 to 8 weeks for approximately two hours each session. Two staff members facilitated parenting group discussions, and two child development specialists implemented child activities while the parents met. Parents and children engaged in parent-child activities after the parent discussion sessions.

The paper is divided into three sections: (a) the conceptual foundations of a capacity-building model, (b) a description of a capacity-building approach to implementing a parenting education program, and (c) preliminary results from using the capacity-building model and approach in terms of improvements in parenting competence and confidence. The content of this paper provides a basis for linking theory, practice, and evaluation in a

way that insures practice was consistent with program intentions.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

The *Parenting Club* used a capacity-building approach to supporting and strengthening family competence and confidence using an operational definition of capacity-building and a model defining the influences of practitioner beliefs and practices on desired parenting outcomes. The capacity-building model includes the use of family-centered beliefs, attitudes, and practices for supporting and strengthening parent functioning (Dunst, 2002; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Trivette & Dunst, 1998, 2000).

Definition of Capacity-Building

A review of relevant literature about both capacity-building and family-centered helpgiving practices (e.g., Aspen Institute, 1996; Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2000; Cochran & Woolever, 1983; Finegan & Laschinger, 2001; Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001), as well as numerous discussions with practitioners about their experiences working with children, families and communities, were used to develop the definition of capacity-building described in this paper. *Capacity-building* is defined as:

> A continuous process of providing, creating or mobilizing experiences through which children, parents, families, and communities enhance their ability to identify and engage in development-enhancing opportunities or to address challenges in a sustainable way (Wilson et al., 2003).

More specifically, capacity-building is a process of providing individuals and/or groups with experiences and opportunities to develop knowledge and skills and use these abilities to achieve self-identified outcomes and address challenging life events. Accordingly, it is not only important to provide information and promote skill development but it is as important to do so in ways that result in the development of new knowledge and skills strengthening self-efficacy beliefs and behaviors that influence future decision-making, parenting strategies, and parenting competence and confidence (Rappaport, 1981; Trivette & Dunst, 1998).

Capacity-Building Model

Figure 1 shows the key components of the capacity-building model that was developed based on the above mentioned literature review and practitioner experience and feedback. The major components of the model include a capacity-building philosophy, capacity-building

processes, reflection, and the capacity-building benefits (e.g., increased parenting confidence and competence) of participatory learning opportunities.
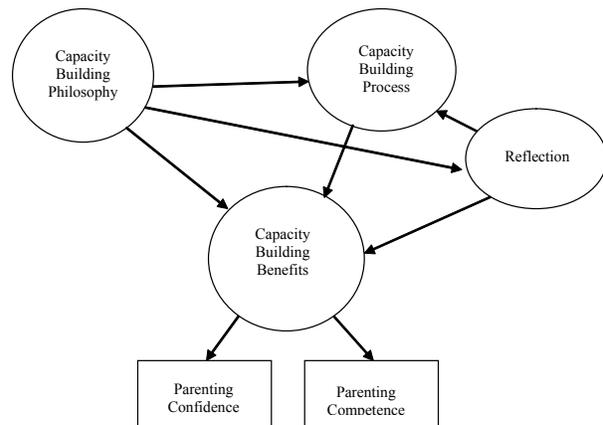
Figure 1. Major components and elements of a capacity-building model for supporting and strengthening parenting confidence and competence.

Capacity-Building Philosophy

A basic foundation of the capacity-building model is recognizing the strengths and abilities of individuals and groups and the conditions supporting and strengthening these capabilities (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The model is based on the premise that in order for an experience or opportunity to have capacity-building potential for a child, parent, family, and/or a community group, a practitioner's practices as well as the characteristics of the opportunity afforded individuals or groups, need to be: (a) interest-based, (b) strengths- and asset-based, and (c) promote and enhance individual or group learning and use of both their existing and newly acquired abilities over time.

Interest Based. Interests refer to an individual's likes, preferences, favorites, and so on that encourages participation in different activities, expression of existing abilities, and enhancement of new competencies (Dunst, Herter, & Shields, 2000; Kellegrew, 1998; Krapp, Hidi, & Renninger, 1992; Raab & Dunst, 2006). Interest-based programs and activities focus on self-identified priorities and desires as a way to strengthen existing skills and promote acquisition of new competencies.

Strengths- and Asset-Based. Strengths and assets are the particular talents and abilities that an individual, family or group possesses, and which are most likely to be used as a means to participate in different settings, activities, and events (Beaulieu, 2002; Dunst, Trivette, & Mott, 1994; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Strengths- and asset-based practitioners have a basic belief and attitude that everyone (e.g., children, parents, families, and communities) has existing strengths and abilities (assets) and the capacity to become more competent (Dunst, 1995; Rappaport, 1981).

Promotion and Enhancement. A promotional and enhancement philosophy includes beliefs and attitudes that the experiences and opportunities afforded children, parents, families, and communities are designed to enhance, bring about, and optimize growth and functioning (Dunst, 1995). Practitioners who use promotional intervention practices believe and practice in a manner that demonstrates that individuals and groups can take an active role in strengthening existing and developing new knowledge and skills to achieve self-identified outcomes.

Capacity-Building Process

The process component of capacity-building model is comprised of three major elements: (a) participatory (parenting learning) opportunities, (b) practitioner participatory helpgiving, and (c) active learner participation in activities and experiences for achieving desired outcomes. Capacity-building processes place major emphasis on the ways in which practitioners provide or mobilize opportunities for individuals or groups to be actively involved in using their interests and assets for addressing their priorities, and the manner in which individuals or groups take advantage of the opportunities they are afforded (Dunst, 2000; Dunst, 2004a, 2004b).

Participatory Opportunities. Participatory opportunities are the experiences that are afforded individuals or groups that provide them the contexts to strengthen existing and learn new knowledge and skills, and to act on their own behalf to accomplish desired outcomes. These opportunities are most likely to be effective to the extent that they are inviting activities or experiences, and make possible the use of existing and new abilities in ways that strengthen parenting confidence and competence. Participatory opportunities in themselves are not capacity building. It is only when individuals or groups recognize and take advantage of these opportunities that they develop new knowledge and skills (Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2000; Dunst, Trivette, & LaPointe, 1992).

Active Participation. Active participation refers to an individual or group taking responsibility for and actively engaging in experiences and opportunities to accomplish a desired outcome. Table 1 shows a continuum that we have found useful for thinking about different levels of parent participation. The levels range from an individual or group being a passive participant in an activity to taking direct control of activities to accomplish a desired outcome.

The more actively individuals and groups participate in achieving desired outcomes, the more likely they are to strengthen existing skills, learn new abilities, and

Table 1

Scale for Assessing Levels of Parent Participation in the Parenting Club

Levels	Degree of Participation
0	Present; not engaged in anyway, attentional or otherwise in the target of interaction or outcome
1	Intermittent interest; engages in activity and then disengages
2	Recipient of information; showing interest in information or activity
3	Analyzing and processing current information and/or experience(s); making a plan to use a parenting strategy
4	Acting on information and or experience(s); initiating action; putting plan into action; generating new ideas or solutions
5	Leadership role in an interaction or leadership role in an activity toward achieving desired outcome

increase their level of comfort in initiating and following through with the steps necessary to address their desires and priorities. Individuals or groups who take responsibility for achieving desired goals, more likely will attribute their successes to their own abilities and their own efforts (Bandura, 1986). These self-attributions or self-efficacy beliefs are remarkably motivating, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of confidence further influencing competence and so on (Skinner, 1995). Research shows that personal and collective capacity is strengthened when individuals or groups take responsibility for and are engaged in the activities to accomplish desired outcomes.

Participatory Helpgiving. Participatory helpgiving practices include helpgiving attitudes and behaviors that a practitioner uses to assist others to use their existing strengths and acquire new abilities to mobilize desired resources and supports to accomplish desired outcomes (Dunst, 2002; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Trivette & Dunst, 1998). Participatory helpgiving practices include behaviors that a practitioner uses to assist individuals and groups to make informed choices and decisions and take action to achieve desired outcomes. These practices also include practitioner responsiveness and flexibility in response to individuals and groups and their unique and changing circumstances.

Importance of Reflection

Reflection is a key component of the capacity-building model because research indicates that efforts to assess the sources of the consequences of participatory opportunities strengthen a person's beliefs about his or her role in producing desired outcomes (McKay, 2000; Schon, 1987). Reflection is characterized by an individual or group developing a deeper understanding of how they acquired new knowledge and skills, and how they attribute change, learning, and growth to themselves as well as recognizing what they would need to do differently the next time they encounter a challenging life situations.

Capacity-Building Practices Benefits

The benefits that are realized from a capacity-building model and practices included, but are not limited to, are increased abilities to recognize existing strengths and/or developing new knowledge, skills, and making positive self-attributions about one's ability to execute desired courses of action. Capacity-building practices, opportunities, and experiences strengthen or promote the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in develop-

ment-enhancing opportunities or address challenges in sustainable ways (Aspen Institute, 1996; Wilson et al., 2003). In addition, capacity-building practices promote positive self-attributions by individuals and groups about their knowledge and skills to the extent that they recognize their own strengths and abilities and how to use their strengths and abilities to produce desired consequences (Bandura, 1997).

CAPACITY-BUILDING PARENTING EDUCATION

The capacity-building model described above was used for planning and implementing the *Parenting Club* to develop and use practices strengthening and increasing parenting confidence and competence in childrearing and parenting. Table 2 shows the indicators that were used to promote facilitators' use of capacity-building practices during the implementation of the *Parenting Club*. The following descriptions of the practices and activities serve as examples of how the capacity-building model was used to insure facilitators' adherence to the model practices.

Table 2

Capacity-Building Characteristics and Practice Indicators Guiding the Implementation of Parenting Club Activities

Capacity-Building Characteristics	Practice Indicators
Interest-Based	Parents identified what they wanted to get from participation in the group
	Practice scenarios developed by facilitators were individualized to interests and examples group members had given
	Facilitators used parents' feedback to make ongoing revisions to structure, content and processes of group
Asset-Based	Parents identified their own parenting strengths in knowledge and skills
	Parents used strengths to meet self-identified goals
	Parents were able to identify and build on child strengths
	Parents were encouraged by the facilitators to build and elaborate on their strengths
Participatory Opportunities	Facilitators created opportunities for parents to talk together about parenting issues
	Parents created opportunities for parents to talk together
	Parents were encouraged to use information/strategies gained discussions in their own parenting situations and in child/parent play activities
Active Participation	Parents generated solutions/strategies in collaboration with other parents and the facilitators
	Parents used parenting knowledge/skills in the discussion group activities
	Parents used parenting knowledge/skills in the parent-child play activities
	Parents used parenting knowledge/skills at home, in community, etc.
Reflection	Parents reflected on their use of parenting practices
	Facilitators responded to parents' unsolicited reflections in ways that encouraged more and ongoing reflections from parents

Interest-Based

The *Parenting Club* was interest-based in several ways. First, parent interests and priorities were identified by the participating parents and caregivers. Parenting and child rearing interests and priorities shared by parents and/or observed by facilitators determined discussion topics, guided information sharing, and were incorporated into the activities in which parents or the group participated. Second, the *Parenting Club* facilitators developed and used practice scenarios tailored to parents' interests and priorities which originated from the examples provided by the parents. To ensure that the program activities remained interest-based, facilitators used ongoing feedback from participants -- both volunteered and solicited -- to determine what information or strategies regarding child development, parenting, and other such topics of interest were discussed in future *Parenting Club* sessions.

Strengths- and Asset-Based

During *Parenting Club* sessions, facilitators made and/or provided time and opportunities for parents to identify and use their strengths and abilities with respect to parenting and childrearing. This was accomplished through discussions, practice scenarios, and reflection activities. Discussions often focused on how parents could use their strengths to achieve self-identified desires for their children and family. For example, one parent felt she was being a "bad" parent by letting her child stop and look at beetles while on a walk to the store. She felt like she needed to keep her daughter focused by going directly to the store rather than allowing her to explore bugs and other things along the way. During the *Parenting Club* discussions she realized that as a parent she was being patient and allowing her child time to explore and to support her child's learning. This parent was able to identify her strength (being patient) and recognized that she used it to give her daughter time to learn about insects.

Parents also were encouraged to be actively involved in identifying their children's interests and assets, and planning ways to support and promote their children's use of strengths and abilities. As part of the above example, this same parent also realized that her child really liked beetles and other bugs, enjoyed looking for them, and as a result, the parent planned on providing her daughter more opportunities to do so.

Promotion and Enhancement

Taking a promotional and enhancing approach went hand-in-hand with being strengths-and asset-based. *Parenting Club* facilitators and the activities they used focused on enhancing the existing strengths and assets of each parent as well as parents as a group. They demonstrated this by following the parents' lead, asking parents about parenting strategies that they found successful, and commenting positively on parents' contributions to the group about parenting and childrearing strategies.

Participatory Parenting Opportunities

The *Parenting Club* used participatory opportunities in two different ways. First, the physical locations for the *Parenting Club* activities set the occasion for parents to participate in the parenting education activities. The *Parenting Club* sessions were held in family resource centers in the communities in which the parents lived. The centers were easily accessible, and warm and welcoming to the children, parents, and other family members. This had the effect of increasing the likelihood that parents would attend and participate in the program.

Second, facilitator-led practices encouraged and supported parent involvement in discussions, the identification and use of parenting strategies, parent reflections on successful parenting strategies, and parents' sense of comfort in using the parenting strategies. Some of the strategies used by the facilitators included, but were not limited to, commenting positively to parents about their children, sharing observations about parent and child interactions, asking open ended questions about effective parenting, assisting parents to make decisions about parenting strategies best suited for them and their children, encouraging parents to evaluate the results from using specific parenting strategies, and inviting parents to share their thoughts, experiences, stories, and parenting strategies that they found effective. By building rapport with parents and families, as well as promoting parents and families interactions with one another, facilitators helped set the stage for parents to feel comfortable and at ease both sharing and participating in the *Parenting Club* sessions.

Active Parent Participation

All *Parenting Club* practices and activities focused on promoting the active participation of the parents in program activities. During the *Parenting Club* sessions, participants shared stories, listened to one another, reflected on their experiences, developed plans for trying new parenting strategies, and engaged in group activities designed to strengthen participants' knowledge and understanding of parenting and childrearing practices. As participants actively used their knowledge and abilities, it became more and more likely that they would

help each other think about solutions and strategies and identify additional topics of interest. As a result, the parents were able to strengthen and develop their abilities to analyze their use of parenting strategies and were able to engage in a capacity-building process anytime, anywhere.

Participatory Helpgiving

The *Parenting Club* facilitators used participatory helpgiving practices that promoted parents/families choice and actions as well as used behaviors that were flexible and responsive to parents' and families' priorities and interests. Facilitator-led activities included: (a) asking open-ended questions that promoted active participation, (b) providing information that parents used to make informed decisions, (c) engaging parents in discussions about which parenting strategies to implement and how and when to implement these strategies, (d) and using practices that shifted the balance of leadership to the parent participants so that parents generated "answers" as much as, if not more, than the facilitators.

Parent Self-Reflection

Parent self-reflection of their parenting capabilities was woven into every *Parenting Club* session. Facilitators helped parents ask themselves key questions to evaluate their experiences, parenting strategies, and the consequences of using parenting strategies. The reflective process focused on having parents examine their actions and compare them to their intentions, and to use this information to plan new or modify actions to address their parenting and childrearing concerns or answer their questions. Reflections almost always led to new action plans, whether it was to try a new parenting strategy, modify an existing parenting approach, or to continue what was working well.

During the *Parenting Club* sessions, facilitators used reflective questions to encourage parents to consider their actions and become more aware of their knowledge and skills, the consequences of their actions, and to plan what to do next (e.g., "How did that strategy work for you and your child?" "What about that parenting strategy was helpful?"). Rather than telling parents what to do or even suggesting what to do when parents brought up a topic (e.g., toilet training), facilitators asked questions about what the parent was currently doing, what things already worked well, and how did the parents make that happen. For example, facilitators guided parents through reflective processes where the parents developed a greater understanding of the factors that influenced their choices and decisions about their successes which, in turn, generated a wider range of potential solutions. Reflection

helped parents make informed decisions about parenting strategies, use these successful strategies in the future, and to attribute their successes to their own efforts.

EVALUATION OF THE CAPACITY-BUILDING MODEL AND APPROACH

The parents and caregivers participating in the *Parenting Club* were asked to complete a brief questionnaire to identify whether the practices used with the parents were consistent with a capacity-building approach to parenting education. The parents were asked to rate five different capacity-building practices on a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all to almost always* the case that facilitators used the practices. The practices that were assessed as either consistent or inconsistent with the *Parenting Club* model were interest-based, asset-based, participatory opportunities, active participation, and reflection. Figure 2 shows the percentage of parents indicating that the *Parenting Club* activities adhered to the capacity-building practices. What are shown are the percent of parents who indicated that the *Parenting Club* practices were consistent with stated intentions. Nearly all the parent agreed that the program operated in the manner planned.
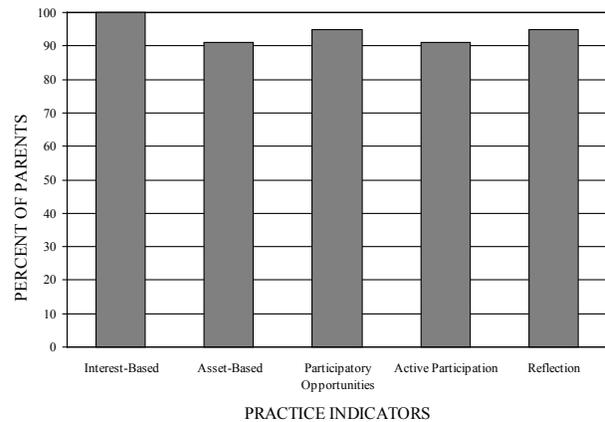
Figure 2. Percent of parents reporting practice indicators were "almost always" or "a lot" consistent with capacity-building practices.

Parents also commented positively on their enhanced or newly acquired parenting competence and confidence that they attributed to their participation in the *Parenting Club* program. For example, one parent described how *Parenting Club* discussions increased her knowledge about child behavior and age related expectations ("They [the facilitators and parents] made me more aware of certain things like how much is 'good' behavior, how much is 'bad' behavior but age related, and how

much is actually misbehavior. I realized that my children are really pretty good kids").

Another parent described learning new ways of parenting, such as "giving [her child] choices with going to bed as the more attractive one" [and by saying that] "I now put him down for a nap, we used to rock and then I would lay with him, I have been able to let him lay by himself and it's been ok." Other parents made statements about their newly acquired confidence and appreciation of their parenting (e.g., "I can see a change in my entire family because I have started saying more positive things to them," "I learned how to stand my ground during tantrums. It is working and I feel proud of myself," and "Spending more time with my children is something I've wanted to do. I feel good about it"). Table 3 includes other examples of parent comments that illustrate the manner in which program participants developed knowledge, skills, and made positive statements about themselves as parents and their parenting as a result of their participation in the *Parenting Club*.

CONCLUSION

The capacity-building model described in this paper was found useful for planning and guiding the development and implementation of the *Parenting Club* parent education program. The initial results from the *Parenting Club* evaluation suggest that this kind of approach promotes parents' confidence and competence as a result of their participation in a program because it was interest- and asset-based, created participatory parenting opportunities, and provided opportunities for reflection on parenting strategies. Facilitators as well reported that the model was useful for: (1) determining topics for parent discussions (interest-based), (2) actively involving parents in achieving self-identified childrearing and/or parenting outcomes, (3) guiding facilitators' participatory practices, (4) involving parents in identifying and evaluating childrearing and parenting strategies, and (5) influencing parenting confidence and competence in a positive way.

Table 3

Examples of Parent Statements Describing the Capacity-Building Benefits of the Parenting Club

Benefit	Parent Supporting Statement
Knowledge	"Knowing her interests and strengths made me more understanding of how she was feeling."
	"I learned from the Parenting Club. It's more giving positive attentions while she is being good."
	"It made me realize that and he was trying to communicate with me and got me to stop and watch and let him do things on his own and not do it for him. That he could do it if I just gave him the chance."
	"I never realized how important all the little decisions are that I make as a parent. There are no simple things. It all means something to my child."
Skills	"It gave me ideas on ways of handling things, not to get to the point where I was doing everything for my grandson."
	"Giving him choices, with the bed being the more attractive one, was the part that was different from what I had done before"
	"She always wants to look for beetles. I was more understanding and let her be curious. That was one of the ways they helped me, by showing me that I was rushing her some times and some times I needed to calm and let her explore."
	"Picking up before we had music and snack. I apply that with my child at home too and that works." "I learned to say something other than, 'No'."
Attributions	"…I realized that my kids are really pretty good kids."
	"I thought I was letting my daughter get away with things but in reality I was just being an understanding parent."
	"I just treated misbehavior the same. No is no. If they are hungry or they are sick, you have to figure out why they are doing this."
	"I can see a change in my entire family because I have started saying more positives to them."
	"When I first found out I had to come here I thought I was a bad parent, but that's really not true at all. Everyone can benefit from talking about how they parent and share their ideas. I'm just as much of an expert as everybody else and I have helped people the same as they have helped me."

The next steps in determining the usefulness of the capacity-building model and approach to implementing parenting education programs is to further determine and investigate the extent to which practitioner use of the *Parenting Club* approach results in other positive outcomes for parents and children. This is being accomplished using other parent surveys and by conducting interviews with program participants. The findings are expected to highlight those aspects of the *Parenting Club* that matters most in terms of positive program consequences.

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