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Now They Know: Helping New Mothers Gain Parenting Knowledge and Become Aware of Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Programming

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Abstract: *The Guide for New Parents* is a cross-programmatic educational resource developed to help new mothers adjust to parenting and learn about Family and Consumer Sciences Extension (FACS) programming. Approximately 8,600 new mothers were reached, and responses from a diverse and representative sample of mothers revealed that this resource was perceived as useful and promoted public awareness of FACS Extension. Future educational resources that integrate content across Extension programs for targeted audiences can be useful in building greater public awareness and utilization of the various resources available from Extension.

Introduction

Quality, research-based, reliable parenting information for new parents can be essential for the development of the novice family. Acquired parental knowledge has been shown to help parents feel better prepared to handle the copious stressors involved in the transition to parenthood (Hess, Teti, & Hussey-Gardner, 2004). Parents not only report a desire for information in the face of challenges associated with parenthood (Weigel & Martin, 1996, 2004), but they tend to prefer receiving this information through written educational materials and rate them as helpful and relevant (Hennon & Peterson, 1981; Merkowitz, Jelly, Collins, & Arkin, 1997; Weigel & Martin, 1996). Research has shown that printed materials are an economical, effective means of educating parents "just in time"â providing parenting information based on the age of the child when information is most needed (Bogenschneider & Stone, 1997; Dickinson & Cudaback, 1992; Nelson, 1986; Riley, Meinhardt, Nelson, Salisbury, & Winnett, 1991; Weigel, & Martin, 2004).

Extension offers printed and on-line resources for parents and families on a variety of topics in the Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) program area (e.g., parenting, child development, nutrition, food safety, financial education). However, parents are likely not to turn to Extension for information to support their family because they are not aware of Extension or the resources available to help them. Research shows that the general public knows little about Extension and particularly FACS Extension programs (Clarkson-Frisbee, Bartman, Gregov, Gregory, & Day, 2008; Warner, Christenson, Dillman, & Salant, 1996). Further, urban residents are far less likely to be aware of FACS Extension than rural residents because of lack of historical exposure to Cooperative Extension (Warner et al., 1996). Thus, there is a need to not only assist new parents during their transition to parenthood, but to also build their awareness of the various resources available within FACS Extension to support them.

The Guide for New Parents

The Guide for New Parents (GNP) was designed to reach new parents during a "teachable moment" (i.e., at the time of birth), when parents have a need and desire for reliable and immediate infant care knowledge. The GNP is a 12-article publication that provides parents with relevant information applicable to both immediate and future needs related to the care of self, child, and family. The content features research-based information specific to a variety of FACS Extension program areas, including infant development, parenting, co-parenting and couple relations, child care, nutrition and health, food safety, housing and environmental safety, and financial management and planning. See Table 1 for a brief description of each article or visit http://www.fcs.uga.edu/ext/reach_new_parents.php for more information. Each 2-page article reinforces the resources and expertise available at the state and county level and includes a referral to the University of Georgia FACS Extension website <http://www.gafamilies.com> and the local county Extension office (via 1-800-ASK-UGA1) for more information and support.

Table 1.
Title and Content of Articles in the Guide for New Parents

Article Title	Focus
1. What to Expect the First Month	Neonatal period, sleeping, crying, infant development
2. Nurturing Your Baby's Brain	Brain development, early experiences, parent-infant interaction
3. Breast-Feeding	Successful breastfeeding, self-care while nursing
4. Successful Bottle-Feeding	Successful bottle feeding, preparation and storage, bonding
5. Parenting Together	Co-parenting, communication, support, flexibility, respect
6. A New Set of Family Dynamics	Managing relationships with siblings, partner, in-laws
7. Daddy Time	Nurturing, bonding, support, balancing work-family
8. Child Care Quality Matters	How to identify quality child care, choices, finding programs

9. Putting Baby on a Budget	Assessing spending habits, setting a budget, reducing spending
10. Paying for Your Child's Education	Saving money, college funds, tips on cutting spending
11. A Healthy Home for Baby	Environmental toxins (e.g., mold, lead, radon) and allergy triggers
12. Baby's First Road Trip	Car seat safety, choosing a car seat, installation, position of baby

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to report the preliminary findings from a larger pilot project examining the impact of the GNP on new mothers. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How many and which articles did new mothers report reading?
2. How useful did mothers find the GNP?
3. How familiar were new mothers with FACS Extension?
4. How likely were new mothers to contact and access resources from FACS Extension in the future?

Method

Between September 1 to December 30, 2008, 24 labor and delivery hospitals within 22 counties across Georgia distributed the GNP during a 3-month block of time. County FACS Extension agents coordinated with hospital staff to deliver copies of the GNP to the hospital and ensure that each mother who gave birth during this period of time received the GNP. The GNP was included with other materials from the hospital that were handed to new mothers by a nurse or educator prior to discharge.

To collect feedback from the mothers who received the GNP, business reply survey postcards were included in the GNP for mothers to return in exchange for a Baby's First Year Calendar. Follow-up surveys were later mailed to those mothers who returned a postcard to further assess impact. This article is primarily focused on the responses from the postcard surveys returned to date. A description of all questions included on the postcard survey is provided in the Results presented below.

Sample

Based on monthly reports collected from the 22 participating hospitals, 9,465 women gave birth during the 3-month distribution period, and approximately 8,600 (91%) of these new mothers received a copy of the GNP. As of September 30, 2009, 307 mothers from across Georgia had returned a postcard. The GNP reached mothers in approximately 75 counties (47% of all Georgia counties), and 63% of mothers who

returned the postcard gave birth and resided in one of the 22 counties where the GNP was distributed. The majority of mothers (87%) reported delivering their babies during the distribution period; the remaining mothers likely received a copy of the GNP from participating hospitals who continued to distribute extra copies of the GNP as well as from friends or family members who may have obtained a copy of the GNP at the time of their birth. As well, the majority of mothers returned the postcard survey within 1 month of their baby's birth: 42% returned it the same month, 32% 1 month after, 18% 2-3 months after, and 8% returned it 4-10 months after their baby's birth.

The 307 mothers who returned a postcard ranged in age from 13 to 42 years ($M = 25.2$; $SD = 6.0$), and most (57%) were between the ages of 20-29. Most were first-time mothers (51%), either Caucasian (58%) or African American (33%), unmarried (53%), and had completed high school (80%). Overall, the general profile of the current sample was similar to that of mothers across Georgia who gave birth in 2008 (Georgia Department of Community Health, 2010), with two exceptions: the sample included a higher proportion of first-time parents (51% vs. 38%) and a smaller proportion of Hispanic mothers (6% vs. 15%). This later difference is likely the result of fewer Hispanic mothers reading the GNP or completing the postcard because it was only available in English.

Results

What Mothers Read

In order to determine whether mothers read the GNP and which articles they did read, mothers were asked to check each article they read so far. As shown in Figure 1, of the 306 mothers who responded, 96% reported reading at least one article; most (48%) reported only reading one to four articles; and 21% read at least nine of the 12 articles. In regards to the specific articles read, Table 2 shows that the most commonly read articles were specific to the mothers' current developmental needs (e.g., understanding their infant's development and nutritional needs). According to one mother: *"The articles were very informative. Not complex articles to read. Simple and straight to the point."*

Figure 1.
Total Number of Articles Mothers (n = 306) Reported Reading

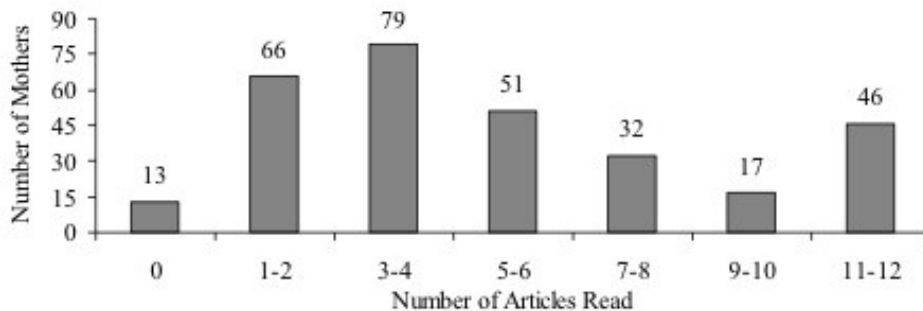


Table 2.
Specific Articles Mothers (n=306) Reported Reading

Article (program area)	n (valid %)
Article 1. What to Expect the First Month (child development)	253 (82.7)
Article 3. Breast-Feeding (nutrition)	174 (56.9)
Article 2. Nurturing Your Baby's Brain (child development)	151 (49.3)
Article 5. Parenting Together (family life)	150 (49.0)
Article 4. Successful Bottle-Feeding (nutrition and food safety)	143 (46.6)
Article 7. Daddy Time (parenting and family life)	139 (45.4)
Article 11. A Healthy Home for Baby (housing)	136 (44.4)
Article 12. Baby's First Road Trip (child development)	103 (33.7)
Article 9. Putting Baby on a Budget (finance)	102 (33.3)
Article 8. Child Care Quality Matters (child development)	96 (31.4)
Article 10. Paying for Your Child's Education (finance)	85 (27.8)
Article 6. A New Set of Family Dynamics (family life)	72 (23.5)

When asked who else read the GNP, of the 199 (65%) mothers who checked off that someone else read it, 80% ($n = 160$) reported their husband/partner also read the publication. According to one mother, "This book was very helpful. I learned things that I didn't know. It also helped my husband also." As well, mothers passed the GNP on to their baby's grandparents ($n = 48$; 24%) and other family or friends ($n = 28$; 14%). As shared by one mother: "Thank you for the great information. I passed it all on to a friend who is expecting a baby in August!"

Usefulness of the GNP

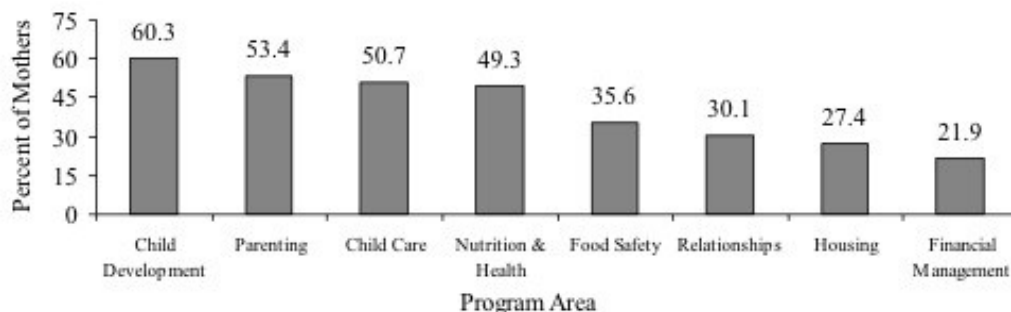
In order to assess the usefulness of the GNP, mothers were asked on the postcard "How useful were the articles you read?" and given the options of (1) Didn't read any yet, (2) Very useful, (3) Somewhat useful, and (4) Not very useful. Of the 280 who responded *and* reported reading the articles, 238 (85%) felt the articles were "very useful," and the remaining 15% felt it was "somewhat useful." As one mother commented on her postcard: "It really helped me and my partner out. It let us relax more and know that we can be great parents." Another mother wrote, "I loved the articles! Thanks so much for your help with providing me and my family with useful information."

Mothers Awareness of FACS Extension

Next, mothers were asked "Before getting this guide, were you aware that UGA Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) Cooperative Extension provides information on the following topics?" and provided with a list of each program area to check off. The majority of mothers (76%) checked "I had not heard of FACS Extension until now." As illustrated in Figure 2, the remaining 73 mothers were most familiar with parenting and foods/nutrition programming. More revealing was that only 3% of the mothers reported that they had ever received information or gone to a program offered by FACS Extension in the past. To further illustrate this disconnect, but the utility of the GNP in creating awareness, one mother wrote: "My mom got info from you 30 years ago and is the one who told me to read this." Another mother commented, "Ready to see what

your people talk about. Because this is 1st baby ready to start a lift off."

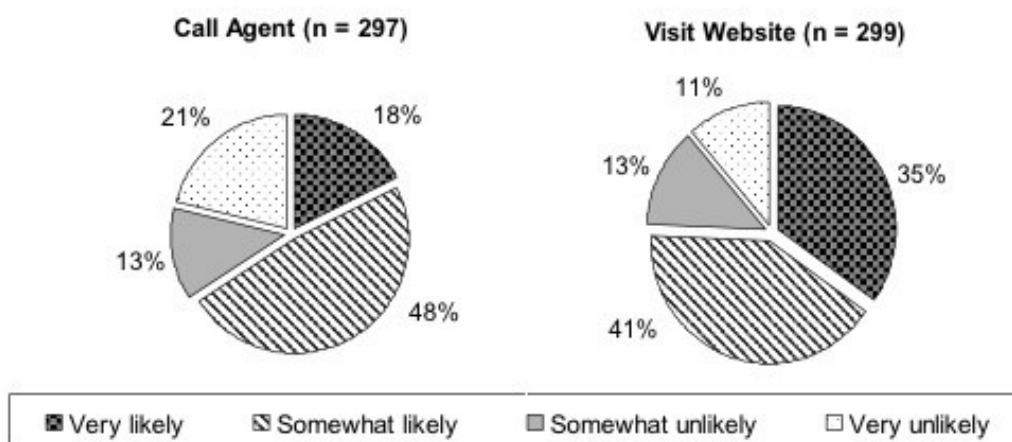
Figure 2.
Program Areas Mothers Were Most Familiar With (n = 73)



Likelihood of Accessing FACS Cooperative Extension in the Future

To further illustrate the utility of the GNP in reaching parents at a critical moment such as birth, 66% of the mothers reported that they were somewhat or very likely to contact their FACS Extension agent by phone, and 76% were somewhat or very likely to visit the FACS Extension website for more information (Figure 3). Comments shared by mothers also reinforce the importance of accessibility to resources (e.g., "I do not have a computer therefore I would not be visiting the website. But if I had a computer I would.") and Extension's need to reach out to the public as opposed to waiting for the public to come to Extension (e.g., "The only reason I'm not very likely to contact the FACS Extension is because I'm limited on time." "Please mail me anything free that can help me to be a better mother.").

Figure 3.
Likelihood of Calling FACS Extension Agent and Visiting FACS Extension Website



Discussion and Implications

The Guide for New Parents (GNP) is a comprehensive publication that introduced new parents to FACS Extension programming and was distributed to them immediately following the birth of their children. From a convenient, yet fairly representative, sample of new mothers across the state, our results suggest that these mothers read the GNP, found it useful, and became aware of FACS Extension. Most mothers reported reading less than half of the articles by the time they returned the postcard, and nearly all of them indicated that they had read articles that were more time sensitive and relevant to their current needs (e.g., "What to Expect the First Month"). Follow-up survey data (not reported here) suggest some encouraging findings that most mothers hold on to the GNP and read more articles over time.

Although most mothers did not initially read every article in the GNP, they all still perceived it to be useful. As one mother wrote on her postcard, "Info presented would be great for "new parents"â helpful to me even though I have 3 kids." Parent educational materials such as the GNP that are delivered at a *teachable moment* may help parents feel more knowledgeable leading to better long-term child and family outcomes (e.g., Garton, Hicks, Leatherman, Miltenberger, Mulkeen, Nelson-Mitchell, & Winland, 2003; Weigel & Martin, 2004). Follow-up survey data reveals that the GNP may be having such positive impacts. For example, one mother commented, "Bond[ing] with baby while feeding was helpful too because I couldn't breastfeed so it gave useful tips for me [on how] to bond with my baby." Another mother wrote, "The baby budget was very helpful, especially with my spending habit. We have a new budget plan and are saving money now."

Cross-programmatic resource guides like the GNP, which contain information reflective of the various FACS Extension program areas (e.g., parenting, nutrition, food safety, finance, housing), may serve to educate the community about the plethora of programming available through Extension. In fact, a significant impact of the GNP was that it helped to raise consumer awareness about FACS Extension and encouraged new parents to take advantage of the educational resources offered by FACS Extension in the future. This is illustrated in this mother's comment:

I had not heard about the GNP or this particular division of the FACS, but the hospital where I delivered gave me the GNP and it was a great tool to help early on in my baby's life. As a second-time mother, the articles offered great reminders and helped me to know that I was caring for my baby properly. I will visit the website any time I have questions or simply want to find out more about caring for my child. Thank you!

Even though the majority of mothers reported that they were likely to contact and access resources from FACS Extension in the future, additional research is needed to assess whether and how they did so.

Because parents rely on printed materials to enhance their knowledge and skills to become successful in the parenting role (e.g., Bogenschneider & Stone, 1997; Riley, et al., 1991), it seems important to make such information more readily accessible to them. Partnering with public institutions (e.g., hospitals) that have convenient access to the focal audience can facilitate cost-effective distribution of educational resources like the GNP. As demonstrated by the pilot study described here, nearly 8,600 new parents were reached in a short amount of time through hospitals located across 22 counties. However, because of the minimal response from Hispanic mothers to the postcard, it is not clear whether the GNP reached these mothers and how they used and perceived this resource. Thus, future efforts to adapt and examine the impact of such resources for non-English speaking audiences are warranted.

In sum, programmatically comprehensive and brief publications like the GNP may be useful as either stand-alone educational tools or as supplements to face-to-face programming. Most important, the study

reported here demonstrated the utility of sharing research-based information across the various areas of FACS Extension programming that is focused on one audience (i.e., parents) during a critical family transition (i.e., birth of a child). Future educational resources that demonstrate the integration of Extension programming in a focused and clear manner and for specifically targeted audiences can be useful in building greater public awareness and utilization of the various resources available from Cooperative Extension.

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