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Newsletters: Treasures or Trash? Parenting Newsletter Series Results in Positive Behavior Changes

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Abstract

The study discussed here was designed to learn if parents of kindergarten children would report a change in parenting behavior based on reading parent education newsletters. The study was done in a rural area where valued face-to-face parenting education is often impossible, given the current norm of parent's lifestyles and the climate of Extension cost restrictions. The study used a post and then pre questionnaire with a sampling of parents. The study concluded that parents of kindergarten children read the newsletters and changed parenting behavior practices, thus validating the use of newsletters as a parent education tool for this audience.

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Introduction

Parenting has become more challenging today, yet time and distance prevent parents' participation in useful programs. To meet parenting education needs while overcoming barriers to

participation in a rural eastern section of West Virginia, Extension agents designed and wrote newsletters for the parents of kindergarten-age students. A cooperative arrangement with the area school system allowed the newsletters to be distributed to kindergarten parents via their children.

The use of newsletters had proven effective in similar situations. The research described here supports the existing literature on the effectiveness of newsletters as a parent education tool (Dickinson & Cudaback, 1992; Riley, Meinhardt, Nelson, Sallsbury & Winnett, 1991; Zimmer, Scheer, & Shriner, 1999; and Bogenschneider & Stone, 1997). An article in the *Journal of Extension* about newsletter research was similar in targeting kindergarten parents, using a brief format, and learning the newsletter was useful (Merkowitz, Jelly, Collins, & Arkin, 1997). However, the study discussed here identified (1) the extent to which parents read the newsletters and (2) the changes in behaviors as a result of reading the newsletters.

Purpose of the Study

The newsletter series *Family Times* applied a methodology of parent education to a new set of topics for a new group of parents. Evaluation of this series contributed to the knowledge base regarding the effectiveness of newsletters for parent education. The purpose of the study was to determine parents' knowledge gain and behavior change after reading the newsletters.

Research Questions

1. Will parents read the newsletters?
2. Can newsletters increase parents' reported use of the parenting techniques described in the newsletters?

Target Audience

The *Family Times* newsletter series was designed to reach parents of kindergarten-age students because they are often more receptive and open to parenting suggestions at this stage in their child's development (Bingner, 1979; Reynolds, 1989). The evaluation survey was conducted in the five rural counties (average population 15,531) within the Potomac Highland region of West Virginia.

Newsletter Topics

Topics for the newsletters were chosen based on the literature regarding the needs of parents of children 5-8 years old (Merkowitz et. al., 1997), or were suggested by authors of the National Network for Family Resiliency (DeBord, Kirby, & Meade, 1999). The topics selected were:

- Dear Parent - Introduction Letter
- Becoming Your Child's Reading Partner
- Developing Responsibility
- Friends
- Dealing with Anger
- Children and Small Screens--TV, Video, Games and Computers
- Setting Limits
- Taking Time to Listen
- Honesty is the Best Policy
- Fears and Feelings

Choice of Delivery Method

The delivery of parent education in a rural community presented several problems. Travel to meetings was often difficult because of distances, weather, and lack of adequate public transportation. Busy parents could not always attend meetings and classes (DeBord, Kirby, & Meade, 1999) and indeed preferred learn-at-home training (Zimmer, Scheer, & Shriner, 1999).

The newsletter could be distributed to a large number of people, could be age-paced to meet the needs of parents, and would be cost effective. Newsletters have been found an effective parent education tool with a variety of other audiences:

- Teen parents (Dickinson & Cudaback, 1992);
- Single parents (Nelson, 1986);
- New parents (Riley, et. al., 1991);
- Volunteers working with five to eight year-olds (Zimmer et al., 1999); and
- Low- and high-risk parents of adolescents, (Bogenschneider & Stone, 1997).

Mailing the newsletter was cost prohibitive, so distribution through the schools was chosen. This method strengthened partnerships with the schools and reinforced work that the schools were already doing (Lerner, 1995). Collaboration with the schools brought the program to parents through an institution that was a routine part of their lives (Merkowitz et al., 1997).

Instrument

The instrument used was a post-then-pre questionnaire design. The post-then-pre method reduces distortion in evaluation findings due to respondents' exaggerated ratings of knowledge or skill prior to a training session (Rockwell & Kohn, 1989). The two-page questionnaire distributed to parents included four general questions about the newsletters, a series of post-then-pre questions assessing parenting behavior before and after reading the newsletters, and demographic questions. A pilot test of the survey, using parents not part of the test population, revealed that the parents could understand and successfully complete the survey tool.

Methodology

Cluster sampling was used to select two schools in each of the five counties to receive the survey forms. Cluster sampling was chosen due to the practical advantages that it afforded for data collection purposes (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991).

The survey was divided into two phases. This was done to shorten the survey and to lessen the length of time between when the respondents received the newsletters and when they were asked to respond about their behavior related to the content of the newsletters. Phase 1 dealt with the first five newsletters, and Phase 2 dealt with the remaining four newsletters.

The same demographic information was requested in each phase. Different schools were used in each phase to reach a broader population. Extension agents in each county developed school contacts, distributed questionnaires to the teachers, collected the returned questionnaires, and forwarded them to one location for collective data entry.

A total of 1,044 kindergarten students received the newsletters in the five-county area. Eight hundred and twenty-eight families were surveyed (369 in Phase 1 and 459 in Phase 2). There was a 42.82% response in Phase 1 and a 33.33% response rate in Phase 2.

Analysis

A series of paired-samples t-Tests were conducted to determine whether differences between respondents' ratings of knowledge before and after the newsletter were statistically significant. The paired samples t-Test accounts for the covariance between before and after responses being greater than zero. This positive difference would be expected in two responses from the same person (Hays, 1988).

Major Findings

A majority of the respondents did read most of the *Family Times* newsletters. Approximately 75% of respondents read three or more of the five *Family Times* newsletters surveyed with the Phase 1 questionnaire. Among the respondents to the Phase 2 questionnaire, 75% read three or more of the four newsletters.

An overwhelming number of respondents (between 60-75% in Phase 1 and 75-85% in Phase 2) did learn something new from the newsletters. Respondents demonstrated the greatest increase in new information from the reading, responsibility, and the "Taking Time to Listen" topic.

Respondents reported positive changes in their parenting behavior. Areas of positive change are arrayed in Tables 1 and 2. The paired sample t-Tests reveal that the bold items in Table 1 are significant. For example, under reading items, there is a significant positive gain among respondents in using the shared reading tips. However, there were not significant gains in reading with children.

Table 2 reveals that the mean for reading with children before reading the newsletter was high, which indicates that most respondents were already reading to their children. Under responsibility, there were four areas of significant gains:

1. Positive gains in parenting behavior,
2. Setting reasonable limits and rules,
3. Involving the child in setting the rules, and
4. Helping the child learn from mistakes.

Table 1.

Results of Paired Samples t-Tests for Post- and Pre-Newsletter Parent Practices with Kindergarten Child, Phase 1

Parent Practice	Mean Differences	SD	t	df
Reading Items				

. . . Read with your child?	2.36E-02	.48	.55	126
. . . Use shared reading tips?	.29	.57	5.59*	120
. . . Write with your child?	2.42E-02	.50	.53	123
. . . Make books with your child?	8.94E-02	.56	1.77	122
. . . Meet with your child's teacher?	4.92E-02	.40	1.34	121
Responsibility Items				
. . . Set reasonable limits and rules?	.12	.35	3.83*	125
. . . Involve child in setting rules?	.11	.47	2.71*	122
. . . Help the child learn from mistakes?	.12	.37	3.44*	119
. . . Make opportunities for the child to practice being responsible?	.15	.50	3.45*	122
Friendship Items				
. . . Know your child's friends?	8.00E-02	.41	2.16	124
. . . Invite other children to your home?	.14	.41	3.72*	123
. . . Encourage your child to join groups?	4.92E-02	.50	1.09	121
. . . Encourage your child to make friends?	.11	.34	3.67*	122
Anger Management Items				
. . . Calm yourself when angry?	.15	.44	3.70*	123
. . . State clear rules to your child?	.11	.32	3.95*	122
. . . Teach your child respect for others?	8.87E-02	.31	3.15*	123

. . . Compliment your child's positive behavior?	.12	.35	3.83*	123
Media Items				
. . . Watch TV as a family?	.11	.36	3.27*	121
. . . Tape good programs to view later?	7.56E-02	.27	3.10*	118
. . . Introduce your child to other fun activities?	.18	.38	5.02*	118
. . . Limit TV viewing time to less than 2 hours per day?	.25	.49	5.71*	122
* Significant at the $p < .05$ level				

Table 2.
Means and Standard Deviations for Parenting Practices Items, Phase 1

Parent Practice	Before Newsletter		After Newsletter	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Reading Items				
. . . Read with your child?	3.54	.66	3.57	.61
. . . Use shared reading tips?	2.49	.98	2.78	.86
. . . Write with your child?	2.99	.92	3.02	.84
. . . Make books with your child?	1.71	.82	1.80	.88
. . . Meet with your child's teacher?	2.70	1.10	2.75	1.08
Responsibility Items				
. . . Set reasonable limits and rules?	3.45	.75	3.57	.65
. . . Involve child in setting rules?	2.85	.94	2.96	.92
. . . Help the child learn from mistakes?	3.37	.78	3.48	.61
. . . Make opportunities for the child to practice being responsible?	3.20	.85	3.36	.70

Friendship Items				
. . . Know your child's friends?	3.27	.91	3.35	.84
. . . Invite other children to your home?	2.48	1.06	2.62	1.05
. . . Encourage your child to join groups?	2.84	1.01	2.89	.97
. . . Encourage your child to make friends?	3.55	.70	3.67	.57
Anger Management Items				
. . . Calm yourself when angry?	3.06	.77	3.21	.72
. . . State clear rules to your child?	3.37	.70	3.48	.62
. . . Teach your child respect for others?	3.73	.55	3.81	.45
. . . Compliment your child's positive behavior?	3.70	.54	3.82	.40
Media Items				
. . . Watch TV as a family?	3.25	.84	3.35	.76
. . . Tape good programs to view later?	2.18	1.17	2.26	1.16
. . . Introduce your child to other fun activities?	3.03	.84	3.20	.72
. . . Limit TV viewing time to less than 2 hours per day?	2.38	.90	2.63	.81
No significant differences were found in the mean scores of the respondents for parenting practices Phase 1.				

Results of the paired sample t-Tests reveal that all of the items in Table 3 are significant with regard to positive changes in parenting practices.

Table 3.
Results of Paired Samples t-Tests for Post- and Pre-Newsletter Parent Practices with Kindergarten Child, Phase 2

Parent Practice	Mean Differences	SD	t	df
Limits Items				
. . . set and maintain consistent	.32	.60	6.13	130

limits				
. . . involve your child in setting rules	.39	.58	7.67	126
. . . check to learn if the child understands the limit	.30	.58	5.80	126
. . . give a child limited choices	.31	.59	5.71	119
. . . follow through with limits that are set	.38	.70	6.18	128
Listening Items				
. . . make time to listen and talk with your child	.26	.49	6.07	129
. . . listen with patience to your child	.28	.57	5.66	129
. . . actively listen with interest and attention	.31	.58	6.15	130
. . . recognize communication blocks	.32	.57	6.20	125
. . . encourage your child to talk	.21	.57	4.19	127
Honesty Items				
. . . praise your child for telling the truth	.14	.39	4.06	128
. . . model correct behavior -- avoid white lies, etc.	.23	.55	4.77	131
. . . not overreact if your child does lie	.14	.60	2.66	125
. . . talk with your child about the importance of honesty	.11	.47	2.76	130
Fears Items				
. . . learn what is causing your child's fear	.25	.58	4.92	126
. . . listen to your child describe fears and feelings	.23	.46	5.63	125
. . . understand that the child's fears are real	.33	.62	6.03	127

. . . help your child deal with fear in small steps	.32	.56	6.36	124
. . . understand that fears are a natural part of growing up	.24	.56	4.91	127
All items had significant differences at the $p < .05$ level.				

Table 4
Means and Standard Deviations for Parenting Practices Items, Phase 2

Parent Practice	Before Newsletter		After Newsletter	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Limits Items				
. . . set and maintain consistent limits	2.89	.88	3.21	.79
. . . involve your child in setting rules	2.38	.93	2.77	.81
. . . check to learn if the child understands the limit	2.89	.88	3.19	.81
. . . give a child limited choices	2.98	.89	3.29	.81
. . . follow through with limits that are set	2.98	.87	3.36	.70
Listening Items				
. . . make time to listen and talk with your child	3.38	.77	3.64	.57
. . . listen with patience to your child	3.06	.81	3.35	.66
. . . actively listen with interest and attention	3.13	.83	3.44	.63
. . . recognize communication blockers	2.75	.89	3.06	.75
. . . encourage your child to talk	3.41	.79	3.63	.65
Honesty Items				
. . . praise your child for telling the truth	3.69	.60	3.83	.45

. . . model correct behavior -- avoid white lies, etc	3.17	.81	3.40	.71
. . . not overreact if your child does lie	2.87	.89	3.02	.89
. . . talk with your child about the importance of honesty	3.64	.61	3.76	.56
Fears Items				
. . . learn what is causing your child's fear	3.24	.81	3.49	.65
. . . listen to your child describe fears and feelings	3.37	.79	3.60	.66
. . . understand that the child's fears are real	3.34	.81	3.66	.58
. . . help your child deal with fear in small steps	3.21	.80	3.53	.65
. . . understand that fears are a natural part of growing up	3.50	.70	3.74	.54

In Table 5, results of the paired samples t-Test for the topic subscales reveal that eight of the newsletters resulted in significant positive changes in parenting behavior. Reading was the only topic where there was not significance.

Table 5.
Results of Paired Samples t-Tests for Post- and Pre-Newsletter Parent Practices Subscales, Phase 1

Subscale	Mean of Differences	t	df
Reading	7.590E-02	2.53	129
Responsibility	.1247	5.13*	126
Friendship	9.933E-02	4.54*	124
Anger Management	.1200	5.52*	124
Media	.1519	6.68*	123
*Significant differences at the $p < .05$ level			

Table 6.
Results of Paired Samples t-Tests for Post- and Pre-Newsletter Parent Practices Subscales, Phase 2

Subscale	Mean Differences	SD	t	df
Limit	.33	.47	8.10	133
Listen	.28	.44	7.30	133
Honest	.16	.38	4.88	134
Fears	.26	.47	6.30	130
All items had significant differences at the $p < .05$ level.				

Conclusions

Based on the results of the research, a parenting newsletter such as the *Family Times* newsletter can increase parents' reported use of parenting techniques. After reading the different newsletters, a significant number of respondents reported positive behavior changes as a result of the suggested parenting techniques. They also reported that they learned something new.

Thus, it is possible to reach parents with parenting information who would not be reached otherwise and effect a behavior change in their parenting skills and knowledge. Most important, many parents will actually read the newsletter. This is the first step in effecting behavioral change using written material. Additionally, newsletter topics that are focused on a specific parenting issue can motivate positive behavior change in the parents.

Implications

When time, money, and personnel are limited, sustained face-to-face contact is not always possible. Extension must explore and evaluate alternative methods for delivering important information. The study discussed here indicates that newsletters that are well written and focused on a specific parenting issue can make a difference in the lives of families.

It is important that the major learning objectives are clear to the reader. In the case of the *Family Times* newsletters, "To Make a Difference" action blocks were used to present a clear message. When these specific actions were targeted in the survey for evaluation, respondents were clearly able to identify with the suggested parenting technique, as indicated by significant behavior change for almost all areas.

The research supports the existing literature on the effectiveness of newsletters as a parent education tool (Dickinson & Cudaback, 1992; Nelson, 1986; Riley et al., 1991; Zimmer et al., 1999; & Bogenschneider & Stone, 1997). The evaluation research study was consistent with Bogenschneider and Stone (1997) and Cudabeck (1988) in finding that a newsletter is suitable to reaching a wide population. Results were also consistent with Riley's findings in 1999 in reaching social isolates that are least likely to attend most kinds of parenting programs, because the newsletters reached parents from a variety of economic and educational levels. The research is currently being replicated in other sections of the state.

Limitations

There are two main limitations on the study's findings.

The survey responses were self-reported by the respondents. Although there is research to support the validity of self-reported responses, this opens the possibility that respondents could over- or underestimate their behavior changes. However, it would have been too expensive to conduct independent observations.

Every effort was made to insure confidentiality in the surveys, but there is the possibility that participants responded in consideration of social desirability to show a positive change. This may have inflated the positive changes in parenting behavior results.

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