

The Circle of Parents® Program: Increasing Social Support for Parents and Caregivers

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Reaching out for help is often difficult in our society, where independence and self-sufficiency are highly valued, and asking for help is often associated with feelings of shame and perceptions of being weak. Our rugged individualism has led to a rejection of the “village approach” to raising children. These days, parenting assistance from neighbors and other community members is more likely to be viewed as intrusive and meddling. Research shows that families across the nation are experiencing increasing stress, but most are not seeking help. A 2002 survey of parents conducted by the YMCA and Search Institute found 78% of parents feel that talking with other parents about parenting issues would help “very much” or “somewhat.” They also reported as helpful: receiving affirmation of their parenting skills and practices, seeking advice from professionals they trust, and having other adults they trust spend time with their children. However, 53% of parents surveyed said that they do not regularly reach out for parenting help from any of these sources.¹ This hesitancy to ask for support, coupled with societal norms of family privacy, creates a culture in which parents often struggle to raise their children without the assistance of a supportive social network.

Social support for families is a critical issue when looking at familial risk factors for child maltreatment. Particularly when a lack of social support is paired with other challenges (e.g., poverty, interpersonal conflict, substance abuse, and mental health issues) parenting effectively becomes increasingly difficult. In *Social Support and the Prevention of Child Maltreatment*, RA Thompson defines social support as, “social relationships that provide (or can potentially provide) material and interpersonal

resources that are of value to the recipient, such as counseling, access to information and services, sharing of tasks and responsibilities, and skill acquisition.”² Reviews of research consistently show that parents with a social network of friends, family, and community members are able to parent more effectively. On the other hand, maltreating families are consistently characterized by a lack of connection to healthy support networks that could provide emotional nourishment, guidance, access to resources, behavior monitoring, and opportunities for learning, growth, and reciprocity.^{1,2,3,4} Despite the importance of social support to healthy family functioning, most child abuse prevention strategies have not fully incorporated strategies to increase this protective factor. This is a missed opportunity, as programs that offer parents the opportunity to connect with other parents to give and receive emotional and practical support have evidence of better outcomes.⁵

The Circle of Parents® program provides a source of strength and support *for parents by parents*, providing lasting friendships

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for participants. The program structure consists of a trained professional facilitator who co-leads weekly group meetings with a parent leader (or multiple parent leaders). Participants are provided with a safe, nonjudgmental environment for peer support and guidance from other parents who share common experiences, successes, and challenges. An accompanying children’s

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program that mirrors the parents' group is provided if resources allow, or quality childcare customarily is provided at no cost.

Social support can impact a family on many different levels contributing to the prevention of child maltreatment. Thompson lists several functions of social support strategies to prevent child maltreatment that the Circle of Parents® program fulfills, including: emotional sustenance; counseling, advice, or guidance; access to information, services, and material resources and assistance; skills acquisition; and social monitoring and social control.²

Each one of these functions is described below, along with explanations of how these functions present themselves in Circle of Parents® groups.

- *Emotional sustenance.* Emotional sustenance encompasses feelings of empathy, connectedness with others who share similar life circumstances, and enhanced self-confidence. The Circle of Parents® program provides a forum for emotional sustenance by allowing participants to build relationships and connect with other parents with whom they share something in common. Participants gain a sense of belonging and relief as they learn that their family dynamics and their child's behavior are often more typical than exceptional. They also are provided the opportunity to give and receive help, which lessens feelings of indebtedness.
- *Counseling, advice, or guidance.* The counseling, advice, and guidance that is provided through the Circle of Parents® program is primarily provided by the other parents in the group and is often better received than if it had been provided by a professional. Participants are assured of an accepting, nonjudgmental environment where their conversations will be kept confidential (within the limits of the law). They become resources to each other inside and outside of the group by sharing coping strategies and parenting skills from parents who have "been there." The presence of the professional facilitator helps assure that what is shared encourages positive parenting strategies.
- *Access to information, services, material resources, and assistance.* The level of information sharing that occurs in groups can be much more meaningful than that traditionally provided through professional support systems. Parents are able to provide and obtain real-life examples of coping strategies and parenting techniques that have been tried, and they are able to learn whether they succeeded or failed. When sharing information about community resources and services, parents can convey their own experiences with them, reveal names of individuals who they have found to be particularly helpful, and communicate how best to navigate the various human service systems in the community.
- *Skills acquisition.* Not only are parents provided with information about new parenting skills in these group settings, but they are also provided with the opportunity to "practice" them in the safe, supportive environment that the group provides, helping them to integrate these new parenting skills into everyday life. Group members use problem-solving techniques, communication skills, and conflict resolution within the

group and are able to refine these skills for effective use at home. Parents also have the opportunity to report on their own experiences of implementing parenting skills at home and get feedback from the group.

- *Social monitoring and social control.* Possibly the most important function of social support, as stated by Thompson, that the Circle of Parents® also provides is social monitoring and social control. Participants in the groups develop a sense of community with their own group norms and values. Groups are even encouraged to develop group rules that reflect these norms and values and often include things, such as nonviolence and personal accountability. These agreed upon rules allow for group members to monitor behavior and point out behaviors that don't conform to the rules with less fear of anger and rejection.

Mutual self-help parent support-group programs, such as the Circle of Parents®, are uniquely able to provide emotional support, while at the same time challenging parental perceptions and behaviors through peer pressure, role modeling, and compliance with group norms. Parents have many opportunities to "give back" the help they have received, but there is no demand that they do so. In addition, self-disclosure and helpful advice may occur more easily because of the lack of personal intimacy among group members. Group members are not really a part of a parent's ongoing social network, and therefore, the risks of disapproval and criticism are lower, which contributes to conversation that is more candid.^{2,3} Sometimes, informal social networks, such as family and friends, may reinforce poor parenting behaviors, intrude on personal privacy, be resentful if support cannot be reciprocated, and even be a source of stress. On the other hand, formal support agents (e.g., counselors, social workers, healthcare providers) must maintain professional boundaries, and therefore are limited in their ability to fill families' needs for emotional nurturance. Typically, families are also discouraged from reciprocating help from formal support agents, which contribute to feelings of indebtedness.

It is important to note that there are often reasons why at-risk families are socially isolated. They can sometimes be very needy and demanding of their social networks, and therefore extremely draining for those trying to provide support. They may have poor communication skills or simply do not know how to have healthy, respectful, reciprocal relationships because they haven't seen or experienced them. These families can often benefit from safe, nonjudgmental opportunities to learn how to have healthy relationships. The Circle of Parents® program allows families to learn by example, modeling, and "testing" relationship skills in a supportive forum, while building new relationships. They offer safe venues within which to admit mistakes, make mistakes, and to learn new strategies for avoiding those mistakes in the future.

The United States Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention recognizes and supports mutual self-help support groups for parents as an effective program strategy.⁶ In addition, this intervention strategy is well received by the parents who are involved, further contributing to its success. Parents who participate

in parent mutual self-help support groups consistently voice satisfaction with the program and report that it is beneficial.^{3,7,8}

While the Circle of Parents® program has a strong theoretical foundation, evaluation has been limited to nonexperimental studies. The available research clearly indicates that the Circle of Parents® model is a promising strategy for strengthening families and preventing child maltreatment. These studies indicate highly positive results for families by addressing risk factors for child maltreatment while enhancing family strengths. Results include the following components that have been shown to contribute to effective parenting and healthy family functioning:

- Parents increase their social support network by connecting with other parents and community resources.^{7,8,9}
- Parents have more confidence in themselves and their parenting abilities.^{7,8,9}
- Parents learn new parenting skills and becoming familiar with child development.^{5,7,8,9}
- Parents learn and demonstrate problem-solving skills.⁵
- Parents learn new ways to cope with stress and manage impulsive reactions.^{5,7,8,9}
- Parents become empowered to influence other parents and their community.⁷

Not only are there positive outcomes for families, but implementing the Circle of Parents® program is relatively inexpensive. With limited dollars available, existing programs struggle to serve the most vulnerable families in our communities. This low-cost, common-sense approach capitalizes on available resources, including a community's "natural helpers," particularly other parents. It is an ongoing, consistent source of support that families can count on, even when they have "aged-out" or been determined ineligible for other services. The Circle of Parents® program works to reduce child maltreatment by filling a gap in

services and providing social support to families during these times of extremely limited resources and poor connections between parents.

The Search Institute's research found that 97% of parents feel there is more they can learn about being a good parent. The researchers concluded, "there is great potential for supporting parents in communities. Yet, most parents may not be looking for formal programs or workshops, but may be interested in informal, relational opportunities for learning, affirmation, and support."¹ The Circle of Parents® program can provide that more informal source of support.

Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina sponsors the Circle of Parents® Network in North Carolina, with the generous support of The Duke Endowment, providing centralized support, resources, training, and technical assistance to local programs participating in the Network, to promote best practices in providing services according to the Circle of Parents® model. It is envisioned that these programs will eventually be available statewide, preventing child maltreatment and strengthening North Carolina families. A statewide advisory committee, which includes state agency representatives, local program staff, and parent leaders, guides our work while building and maintaining the network. Assistance is available to help identify and secure funding for Circle of Parents® programs at the local, state, and national levels. A portion of the funds from The Duke Endowment is also made available through a Request for Proposal process to local Circle of Parents® sites that form supportive partnerships with the faith community. If you are interested in starting a Circle of Parents® group in your community, please contact Katrina Gay, Program Coordinator, North Carolina Circle of Parents® Network, at 1-800-CHILDREN or email kgay@preventchildabusenc.org. For more information on the Circle of Parents® national model, please visit www.circleofparents.org. **NC MedJ**

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