

Over Twenty Years of Evidence: *Active Parenting* Works!

Active Parenting parent education programs have been in use since 1983, with the publication of *The Original Active Parenting Discussion Program* (Popkin, 1983). This groundbreaking program was the first true video-based delivery system applied to the field of parent education. It targeted parents of 2- to 17-year-olds in a six-session, two-hour format. Field test evidence for this program (Popkin, 1984) was published in *The Second Handbook of Parent Education* (Fine, 1991) and reported significant positive changes in the behavior of both parents and children. Of the 274 parents in the study, 97% reported positive changes in their own behavior, 84% reported positive changes in their child's behavior, and 97% indicated that they would recommend the program to friends. All 35 group leaders indicated that they would recommend the program to colleagues. This positive acceptance of a new multi-modal delivery system utilizing video technology as well as traditional methods of group discussion, lecture, role-play and home practice led the program to become adopted by thousands of leaders during the next ten years.

In 1990, Active Parenting spun off a new version of the program for parents of teenagers called *Active Parenting of Teens* (Popkin, 1990). Three years later, the original program was revised and renamed *Active Parenting Today* (Popkin, 1993). *Active Parenting of Teens* was revised in 1998 (Popkin, 1998). An alternative version of *Active Parenting of Teens* allowed teenagers as well as their parents to participate in the training, and was called *Families in Action* (Popkin and Hendrickson, 2000). Finally, *Active Parenting Today* was again revised into its third edition and renamed *Active Parenting Now* (Popkin, 2003). It should be noted that with each revision, an extensive national survey of Active Parenting leaders was undertaken to determine which parts of the program were most effective, which parts needed to be modified, and what new information should be included in the revised version.

In 1998, both *Active Parenting Today* and *Active Parenting of Teens* were evaluated in an independent national study that included 42 groups (n=287) for *AP Today* and 15 groups (n=98) for *AP of Teens*. Results showed that parents did, in fact, perceive their children's behavior as more favorable following completion of the program, as measured by two child behavior questionnaires (reliability ratings of .78 and .87 for children and teens respectively). Results were published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Individual Psychology* (Mullis, 1999).

An additional positive finding in this study reported that there were no significant differences attributed to the income or educational levels of the parents. This evidence that the *Active Parenting* model is effective across a broad spectrum of parents was also found in an earlier Baltimore County Schools study (Brown, 1988). The researcher

reported that the *Active Parenting Discussion Program* was able to attract and retain Title I parents in the course to the same degree as other parents. Among the 157 parents who entered 12 separate *AP* courses in 10 schools, 78% completed the program. This compared very favorably with their former completion rate of only 25% to 50% with previous parent education programs. Said Brown in his report, “There was little doubt that the Office of Chapter I, ECIA, the counselors and resource teachers who led the groups, and the parents who participated were well pleased with *Active Parenting*.”

In a separate study, Urban (1991) reported that Spanish-speaking parents who completed an *Active Parenting* group showed improved attitudes towards their children’s behavior and improved parenting methods as compared to a Spanish-speaking control group thus providing evidence of effectiveness across cultures. It should be noted that since the Urban study was completed, the program has been translated into Spanish under the name *Padres Activos de Hoy*, complete with Spanish-speaking actors in the video, making the program even more accessible to Spanish-speaking parents. The Spanish program was evaluated by CLAS (Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services), which recommended it “because of its cultural sensitiveness, support and focus on strengths of the child and parents.” The CLAS reviewer added that the program “provides a positive view of what parents, caregivers and other adults can do to maximize the development of children through a proactive parenting style (2001).”

Nutrition Research Newsletter (2003) reported on a study done by the Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences at the University of Vermont (Berino, 2003), in which *Active Parenting* was used as part of an obesity prevention program with Native American children in a home visitation intervention with their parents. Children in the treatment group significantly reduced their caloric intake and mothers engaged in less restrictive feeding practices over time. Berino concluded that “the home visiting program, targeted at at-risk families, may help to reduce the occurrence of obesity in the pediatric population.” Finally, Fashimpar (2000) reported in *The Journal of Family Social Work* that parents trained in *Active Parenting* improved in their attitudes towards physical punishment and demonstrated a significant improvement in clinically severe parent-child relationship problems. He concluded that “The *Active Parenting* video parent training program is efficient, resulting in important clinical gains in only seven to eight contact hours for parents trained in groups.”

The Families in Action version of *Active Parenting of Teens* underwent extensive evaluation when AuSable Valley Community Mental Health Services received a five-year grant from the Office of Substance Abuse Prevention. The resulting study focused on rural students in middle or junior high school and measured outcomes before the course started and then one year later. The goal of the intervention was “to increase resiliency and protective factors within youth and their parents in order to reduce the likelihood that youth would use alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (ATODs).” Results at the one-year follow-up reported that students who participated in the program, as compared with a control group, showed greater family cohesion, less family fighting, greater school attachment, higher self-esteem, and a belief that alcohol should not be consumed until an older age. Parent participants, as compared to non-participants,

reported stronger opposition to alcohol use by minors and a belief that alcohol should not be consumed until an older age. Results of this evaluation were published in two peer-reviewed journals: *The Journal of Primary Prevention* (Pilgrim, Abbey, et al, 1998) and *The Journal of Drug Education* (Abbey, Pilgrim, et al, 2000).

A very recent national evaluation of *Active Parenting Now* (2003) and the revised *Active Parenting of Teens* (1998) programs (Mullis, 2006) add to the growing evidence of the effectiveness of the model. Using a pre-test/post-test design with a control group, Mullis found that 170 parents who had completed an *Active Parenting Now* group showed significant improvement on scales measuring “Parent Behavior” and “Parent Attitudes and Beliefs” (reliability of .83 and .85 respectively). Mullis also reported a positive, though non-significant, change in “Parent Observation of Child Behavior.” Using the scores of 60 parents who completed an *Active Parenting of Teens* group, Mullis reported a significant positive change on the “Parent Behaviors” scale (reliability of .76) and positive, but non-significant, changes on the “Parent Attitudes and Beliefs” and “Parent Observation of Child Behavior” scales. These findings led the researcher to conclude that the training was indeed helpful in teaching parents effective parenting skills.

Because of the similarities among *Active Parenting* programs—they are derived from the same original program (The *Active Parenting Discussion Program*, Popkin, 1983), use the same theoretical model, teach similar parenting skills, include specific ATOD, sexuality, and violence prevention information and training, and use a six-session video-based delivery system—research results showing evidence of effectiveness with one of the programs lends support for the other programs as well. Some of the findings from over twenty studies are cited below and provide evidence that the literally millions of parents who have gone through these programs have found them effective in stimulating positive change in themselves and their children.

Boccella (1998) reported that parents completing an *Active Parenting* group showed significantly more confidence in their parenting skills compared to a control group. In another control group study, Sprague (1990) reported that parents also significantly improved on measures of communication skills and role support following completion of an *Active Parenting* group. Leonardson (1991), in evaluating a three-school *Active Parenting of Teens* pilot study for the Northeastern Drug and Alcohol Prevention Center in South Dakota, reported significant improvement in parent knowledge about effective methods of parenting and information about alcohol and other drugs as compared to a control group. He also reported that parents completing the course were also significantly less likely “to yell at [their] children” and less likely to “act in an autocratic manner.” Qualitatively, he reported that “the parents rated the program quite highly,” and concluded his report by recommending, “The project should be expanded to other communities.” Redwine (1997), in a descriptive study of parenting styles of parents of four-year-olds, reported that the parents’ unanimously positive perceptions of the *Active Parenting* meetings were valuable in strengthening the connections between home and school. Wiese (1989) reported that parents who participated in the program developed

more tolerant attitudes towards their children and saw themselves as better parents than those who did not participate. Fashimpar (1992) compared *Active Parenting* with two other popular parenting programs: *Winning* and *The Nurturing Program*. Although each of the programs was found to have its strengths, he reported that “Active Parenting has the strongest impact upon improving the functioning of family systems.” The fact that parents only received seven hours of *Active Parenting* training as compared to 37-45 hours of training in the *Nurturing Program* speaks to the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of *Active Parenting*.

While most of the research in parent education utilizes parent self-reporting surveys, an interesting approach was used by Pindar (1994), in which she measured the actual behavior of children. These 110 children were divided into two comparison groups: those whose parents had completed an *Active Parenting Today* group and were in a follow-up group, and a control group of children whose parents had not yet completed a course. The children were observed in a playroom setting while their parents took the course. Behaviors were measured in two categories: negative, such as biting, hitting, bossing, shoving and arguing; and positive, such as expressing and owning feelings, problem solving, independence and willingness to share and take turns. Pindar reports that children whose parents had completed the *Active Parenting* course had a lesser occurrence of negative behavior than the children whose parents had not completed the course. Specifically, of the 142 recorded behaviors in the “graduates” support group, 8% were considered negative and 92% positive. In contrast, children whose parents had not yet completed a course had 84% negative behavior and only 16% positive. Pindar concluded that “the effects of the *Active Parenting Today* class are quite staggering” and that in light of this finding, “one may extrapolate that Michael H. Popkin, Ph. D.’s *Active Parenting* approach need be considered crucial in the family education movement in America.”

In 1990, a six-session video broadcast version of *Active Parenting* was used to expand the program throughout the state of Washington by the Early Childhood Telecommunications Project for the purpose of training 10,000 foster parents. In addition to the video segments, parents also received a free copy of the *Parent’s Guide*. The evaluation conducted by Washington State University (1991) reported that 96% of all respondents indicated that the *Active Parenting* series added to their “knowledge of ways to solve family problems”; 89% reported that the series helped them “manage or cope more effectively with a child’s behavior.” Other findings included “reduction of anger, new recognition for a child’s underlying needs/fears, and increased confidence and patience to the establishment of family councils and improved family functioning.” Since the Washington broadcast project took place, many communities have used the broadcast version of *Active Parenting* to reach parents who might otherwise never enroll in a parenting group.

The *Active Parenting* program was chosen by the Montana State University Extension Service as part of its Building Human Capital initiative. Forty-seven Extension workers were trained to deliver the programs, which allowed the service to reach 42 of 56 Montana counties with the program. In the final evaluation, “Results from this one-of-a-

kind program were positive and led Extension agents in each county to pursue developing coalitions with other human service program providers.” (Folkwein, 1991).

Of the tens of thousands of leaders who have used *Active Parenting* programs to train over one million parents since 1983, many have had professional researchers evaluate their programs for effectiveness. For example, Utica City Schools of New York retained Ciurczak & Co. to evaluate *Active Parenting* groups provided by the Business Training Institute, Inc. to the school district. The evaluation reported that “The workshop results can be considered a success by several different measures...parents overwhelmingly were able to demonstrate their knowledge in each content area through their responses to specific questions for each workshop. The parents evaluated the workshop materials, handouts, and usable information they gained in each workshop very highly, and also recommended the workshop to other parents at a very high level.”

The evidence provided by these evaluations and studies over a period of more than twenty years shows a strong, persistent pattern of success for *Active Parenting* parent education programs. Additionally, program participants and researchers alike have consistently found *Active Parenting* programs to be engaging, easy to lead, efficient, cost-effective, and, most important, effective at bringing about positive changes in parents and children.

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