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Evaluation and Program Planning 26 (2003) 263–274

EVALUATION
and PROGRAM PLANNING

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A process evaluation of a parenting group for parents with intellectual disabilities

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Received 1 October 1999; received in revised form 5 June 2002; accepted 8 July 2002

Abstract

Parents who have intellectual disabilities are a unique population of adults who require specialized parenting programs. The purpose of the present research was to conduct a process evaluation of one such program. This group program is unique in that it is participant driven, and is focused on group learning. Prior to the evaluation, a brief evaluability assessment showed that the major service components of the program were providing a supportive and comfortable environment, teaching parenting skills, and crisis management. The evaluation was conducted using a qualitative, participant observation methodology and took place over a six-month period. The data were collected from facilitator debriefing forms, the evaluator's detailed observations over an eleven-week period, and a small group interview with some of the parents. The results showed that the program components had been successfully implemented and that the participants found the services offered to be of great value.

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Keywords: Parenting program; Disabled parents; Process evaluation; At-risk families; Program evaluation; Intellectual disabilities

Parents who have intellectual disabilities² are a unique population of adults who are slowly beginning to be recognized in society. These parents, who are a heterogeneous group with a wide range of needs, present a challenge to social service agencies that are generally under equipped to adequately support them (Ford, 1997; Tymchuk & Feldman, 1991). Due to their limited intellectual ability, these parents often have difficulty in interacting positively with their children, or providing them with adequate childcare and nourishment (Feldman, Case, & Sparks, 1992). These parenting deficits put their children at a risk for neglectful care, environmentally related developmental delay, and behaviour problems (Feldman et al., 1992; Feldman, Case, Towns, & Betel, 1985). In addition, these parents face other

problems such as poverty, abuse, low literacy levels, social isolation, and low self-esteem (Budd & Greenspan, 1984; Tymchuk, 1991; Tymchuk & Feldman, 1991). While there is a concern that they are unable to adequately care for and meet the physical and emotional needs of their children, it is generally agreed that many of these parents can function competently with adequate training and support (Budd & Greenspan, 1984; Feldman et al., 1992; Whitman, Graves, & Accardo, 1989). However, it is apparent that in order to improve these parents' skills, specialized programs must be put in place that are geared for parents with significant cognitive limitations (Whitman et al., 1989).

Professionals working with intellectually challenged parents are hampered by inadequate policies and lack of community services in their attempts to support such families and meet their unique needs. Indeed, tremendous gaps in services, and the failure of governments to develop and fund appropriate services to support these parents often force social workers to remove children from families that might otherwise remain intact (Ford, 1997). Despite inadequate funding, programs do exist that provide specialized parenting training for parents with intellectual disabilities. In general these parent education programs provide one-on-one intensive training of specific practical

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² People with intellectual disabilities have substantial and ongoing limitations in functioning characterized by significant subaverage intellectual functioning (IQ approximately 70–75 or below) existing concurrently with related limitations in two or more of the following adaptive skill areas: communication, self-care, home living, social skills, community use, self-direction, health and safety, functional academics, leisure, and work (Luckasson et al., 1992).

skills. For example, one successful program has staff members train and assess mothers during home visits. The staff members' use a childcare checklist to assess the mother's parenting skills that includes very specific behaviours such as checking the flow of milk from the bottle before feeding a baby, etc. (Feldman et al., 1992). While this type of one-on-one parental training has been successful, there is also a need for group parenting programs and these have been implemented in several communities. Group programs not only teach parenting skills, but also allow the participants to socialize and participate in discussions with other parents outside their home environment (Whitman et al., 1989).

The present study examined a group parenting program called 'Parents Forever' offered to parents with intellectual disabilities living in the City of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. The program is intended to provide an avenue whereby parents can learn and experience healthy relationships with their children, and learn parenting skills that promote mutually respectful and responsible family units. Parents Forever was initiated in September 1996 after several community agencies and government representatives met at the request of the Saskatoon Early Childhood Intervention Program's Executive Director. Included in the development of the program were the Saskatoon and Saskatchewan Early Childhood Intervention Programs, the Saskatoon and Saskatchewan Associations for Community Living, and several divisions of the Department of Social Services (Community Living Division, Family and Youth Services Division, and the Family Support Center). This planning committee of agency representatives decided that Parents Forever should be developed because existing services in the city neither met the unique needs nor addressed the level of understanding of parents with intellectual disabilities, and because there was agreement that these parents could benefit greatly from some basic parenting education. Further, the committee decided that an evaluation of this parenting program would be of particular value because of its unique nature; such a program had never been attempted in Saskatchewan before and a literature search only revealed a small number of published articles on such programs in North America (reviewed above).

Parents Forever, which is participant driven (i.e. addresses the needs and topics suggested by the participants), uses an appropriately paced group learning approach in which group facilitators teach parenting skills and self-care guidelines in the context of a supportive and comfortable environment. Given the newness of the program, the evaluation team focused on collecting information that could be used for further program development and improvement. As well, initial documentation of the program and its participants were required in order to establish whether more long-term resources should be dedicated to the program; that is, there was a need for accountability information. An evaluability assessment and

a process evaluation were conducted, therefore. An evaluability assessment uses a qualitative approach to identify program components and to specify the main goals of a program (Rutman, 1980). A process evaluation is concerned with documenting and analyzing the way a program operates, and the characteristics of the people being served (Dehar, Casswell, & Duignan, 1993; Posavac & Carey, 1997). Information from a process evaluation is especially valuable when a program is new because the results document how the program is being implemented and targeted; information that program managers find extremely useful as they fine tune the services they provide and plan for the future (Dehar et al., 1993). Here we note that sometimes a process evaluation is used to compare the program-as-implemented with the program-as-planned and, in this circumstance, it is called an implementation evaluation (Grant, 1997; Lipps & Grant, 1990; Posavac & Carey, 1997). However, when doing evaluations for small community-based agencies it is more usual that a process evaluation is used to describe a fledgling program in detail so that program managers and other stakeholders can make adjustments which correspond to the emerging needs of the program's clientele. It is this latter type of process evaluation that was conducted and that is reported here.

1. Method

1.1. Overview

The goal of the process evaluation was to gather information based on observations and feedback about the program in order to describe the program in detail. Therefore, a participant-observer approach was used to collect primarily qualitative data. In a participant observation study, the researchers' participation varies along a continuum (Patton, 1990). The extent to which full participation in a program is possible and desirable depends on the precise nature of the program and the population served (Patton, 1990). In this evaluation the on-site evaluator (Laura Heinz) could not become a full participant in the program due to the fact that the program was designed to serve a special population. However, she made a sustained effort over several months to participate in the program as much as possible in order to yield the most meaningful observational data.

The process evaluation followed a brief evaluability assessment that had been conducted to identify the program components and goals. This information was used to focus the evaluation questions and, more generally, the qualitative research design.

1.2. Evaluability assessment

In our view, an evaluability assessment is often essential prior to conducting an evaluation because it clarifies

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