

FOCUS On EXceptional children

The Missouri Project—Parents As Teachers

Vicki L. Ehlers and Micca Ruffin

Parents As Teachers (PAT) is based on the premise that:

- Parents are the first and most important teachers of their children.
- The home is the child's first schoolhouse.
- Children will learn more during the early years than at any other time in life.
- All parents want to be good parents and care about their child's development.

The Parents As Teachers program is designed to serve *all* families. Parents who have access to early childhood developmental information in a timely manner can use it to enhance the teaching that naturally resides in the role of parenting. How a child grows and learns during these early years, beginning at birth, will affect later development and lay the foundation for future school success.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In 1984 Missouri became the first state in the nation to mandate parent education and family support services, beginning at the child's birth, in every school district. The origin of this mandate dates back to 1972, when the State Board of Education adopted a position paper on early childhood education, defining the role and responsibility of the public education system during the years when home is the child's school.

The State Board's position was rooted in research of the 1950s and 1960s indicating the critical nature of the first three years of life in terms of development of major abilities. This period is also the time when parents are forming and cementing their approaches to child rearing. Studies of early intervention programs initiated in the 1960s showed parent involvement in their child's learning to be the key to the child's success. Findings of the Harvard University Preschool Project, begun in 1965, indicated that the degree of a child's development in language, cognitive intelligence, and social skills at school entry could be predicted at age 3, with few exceptions.

Vicki Ehlers is Parent Education Supervisor, Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Micca Ruffin is Region C Coordinator, Parents As Teachers, Director of Early Childhood/Parents As Teachers, Jefferson City Public Schools; and Parent Educator.

A series of events, orchestrated by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education beginning in 1972, led to passage of the Early Childhood Development Act by the Missouri General Assembly in 1984. The legislation mandated statewide parent-child early education.

In 1975 the Department of Education convened its first Conference for Decision Makers on early childhood education and parenting education. Participants included decision makers from the Departments of Health, Education, Social Services, Mental Health, and Corrections. Presenters laid out the benefits of a solid educational foundation in the first years of life and the damaging effects to children of poor parenting. Missouri's governor subsequently designated early education and parenting education as one of five areas of study at the 1976 Governor's Conference on Education.

During the 1977 legislative session legislators who had served on the Governor's Conference Committee on Early

Childhood/Parenting Education introduced a bill proposing state funding for developmental screening and follow-up services for children 3 to 5 years of age. The intent was to establish awareness of the improved chances for healthy development of children through early childhood/parent education.

In 1981 the Department again convened a statewide Conference for Decision Makers to consider the importance of supportive services to children even younger than 3. From the research on prevention presented at the conference came the conceptual framework for a Parents As Teachers program for families with children birth to age 3.

PILOT PROJECT STUDY

The foundation for statewide implementation of parent education had begun. With funds from the Department of Education, the Danforth Foundation of St. Louis, and four local school districts, the pilot project was launched in 1981. At the same time, the Commissioner's Committee on Parents As Teachers was formed to promote parents' involvement in their children's education statewide.

The funds enabled establishment of four pilot projects to include 380 families who were expecting their first child December 1981-September 1982. Care was taken to ensure that all socioeconomic strata, parental ages, and family configurations were represented.

Beginning in the third trimester of pregnancy and continuing until children reached age 3, Parents As Teachers pilot project participants received the following services:

- Information and guidance before the baby was born, to help expectant parents psychologically prepare for the important job of parenting.
- Timely information about what to look for and expect as the child grew and developed, plus guidance in fostering the child's language, cognitive, social, and motor skill development.
- Periodic screening of the child's educational, hearing, visual, and motor development to detect possible problems or handicaps. If problems were discovered, families were linked with other agencies or professionals for help.
- Monthly personal visits in the home by professionally trained parent educators to individualize the program for each family.
- Monthly group meetings for parents to share experiences and discuss topics appropriate to their children's

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Edward L. Meyen
University of Kansas

Glenn A. Vergason
Georgia State University

Richard J. Whelan
University of Kansas Medical Center

Stanley F. Love
Publisher

Carolyn Acheson
Senior Editor

stage of development. Group meetings were held at Parent Resource Centers in the schools.

PILOT PROJECT EVALUATION

The PAT pilot project had specified seven goals or expected outcomes:

1. Increased knowledge of child development by participating parents.
2. Improved confidence in child rearing by participating parents.
3. Better cognitive and language development of participating children as compared to a comparison group or norm.
4. Better social development of participating children as compared to a comparison group or norm.
5. Fewer undetected incidences of handicapping conditions, particularly hearing and vision, in participating children as compared to a comparison group or norm.
6. Positive feelings about the program's usefulness by participating parents.
7. Positive attitudes toward the school district by participating parents.

Parents' response to periodic questionnaires and telephone interviews by an independent evaluator indicated that families highly valued the services they were receiving and were proud of their children's accomplishments. The best evidence of parents' satisfaction may well have been the low attrition rate.

Research and Training Associates of Overland Park, Kansas, conducted an independent evaluation of the project in 1985, under contract with the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The program's effectiveness was determined by a treatment/comparison group design, using posttests of children's abilities and assessments of parents' knowledge and perceptions. Evaluators randomly selected 75 project children, and from the same communities, 75 comparison children whose parents had not received Parents As Teachers services. Traditional ANCOVE and LISREL analyses of covariance were used to adjust for difference between the two samples. All children were evaluated within 2 weeks of their 3rd birthday at sites equally unfamiliar to the treatment and comparison groups. Examiners did not know the identifying groups of the individual children.

Evaluators used the Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children (KABC) to measure cognitive levels. Zimmerman's

Preschool Language Scale (PLS) was selected to assess children's understanding and use of language. Parents rated their children's social development using selected and adapted items from the "personal-social" domain of the Battelle Developmental Inventory. In addition, psychometrists rated selected aspects of the children's social development at the time of testing. A parent knowledge questionnaire was given to all parents to determine their understanding of child development and appropriate child-rearing practices.

Results of the evaluation confirmed the benefits of the pilot project. At age 3, project children were:

- Significantly more advanced than comparison group children in language development.
- Significantly ahead of their peers in problem solving and other intellectual abilities.
- Significantly advanced over comparison group children in demonstrating coping skills and positive relationships with adults.

Traditional characteristics of "risk" (e.g., parents' age, educational achievement, income, and single-parent status) bore no correlation with project children's achievement. Participation in the project positively affected parents' perceptions of themselves and of their school district. These findings played an important role in stimulating statewide interest in the project. They also lent valuable credibility to pilot project staff members who subsequently trained parent educators and administrators for statewide implementation of the model.

ENABLING LEGISLATION

During 1983 the Governor called together the heads of principal state agencies serving young children and their families—public health, social services, education, mental health, and corrections—and asked them for statements to present to the legislature in support of early childhood family education. He asked for written estimates of savings that could accrue to their agencies through such a program.

The Health Department, for example, detailed how a program of parent education and developmental screening could be instrumental in reestablishing contact with families of children needing health care who had dropped out of their tracking system. In like manner, the Department of Corrections pointed to the high incidence of abuse and neglect in early childhood reported by the prison population. The Education Department spoke to the cost of remedial and special

education services for children who lacked a stimulating, supportive home environment in the formative early years.

The basis for statewide implementation of parent education had been formed. Financing from the Danforth Foundation and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education followed shortly thereafter. At the same time, the Commissioner's Committee on Parents As Teachers was established to promote parents' involvement in their children's education statewide.

Enabling legislation came in 1984 with passage of the Early Childhood Development Act (Senate Bill 658). A legislative appropriation of \$2.8 million in 1985-86 allowed for statewide implementation to begin, providing services to 10 percent of the families with children under age 3. School districts were mandated to provide the programs, and parental

participation was voluntary. The impressive results of the independent evaluation of the Parents As Teachers pilot project led to designation of this approach as the state's model of parent education for families with children birth to age 3.

Widespread acceptance of the program has led to a steady increase in funding to allow for manageable growth. The 1987-88 school year brought statewide implementation and reimbursement of the Screening for Children Ages Three and Four Program and the Parent Education for Families with Children Ages Three and Four Program.

Adding the program for families with children ages 3 and 4 enabled school districts to offer a continuum of services from the last trimester of pregnancy until the child's entrance into kindergarten (see Figure 1). This would include some 5-year-old children who have not yet entered formal schooling.

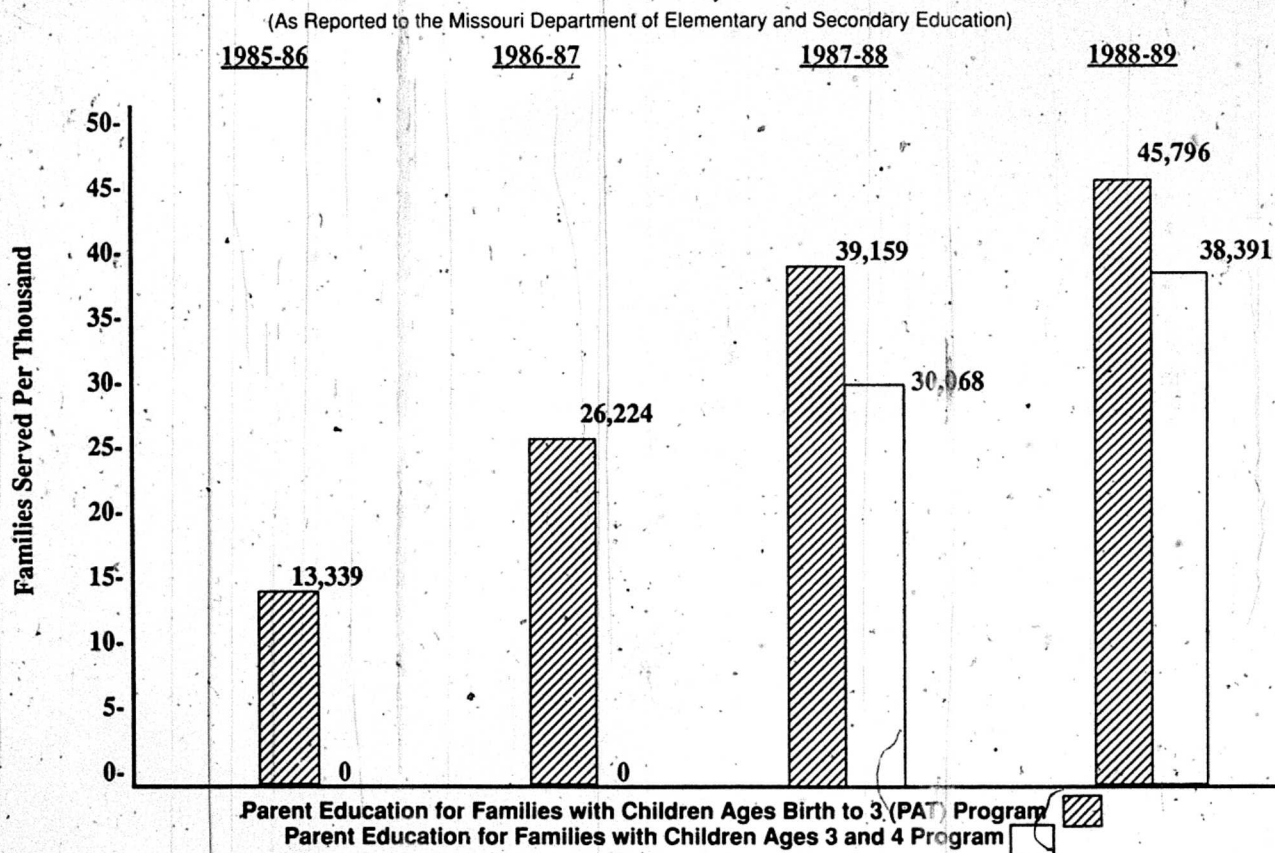


FIGURE 1
Missouri Families Served Through Early Childhood Development Act of 1984
Parent Education Programs

The same components of service are recommended in the program for 3- and 4-year-old children as that of the birth to 3-year-old program. Personal visits with families, group meetings, and early childhood screenings are offered through a school district and within guidelines set forth by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Age-appropriate early childhood material is given to parents to further enhance parents' role as teacher of their children.

The goal of the entire early childhood effort in Missouri is to help children develop to their fullest potential, whatever that might be, and to create the role of parent as teacher by understanding the developmental timeline through which all children move to become well rounded 5-year-olds. The program is not intended to teach academics to children, but it does enable parents to teach the joy of learning through appropriate and positive developmental opportunities and the development of self-esteem, and by helping parents become good observers of their children.

Funds have been made available to school districts that wish to apply for implementing activities and strategies targeted at the hard-to-reach/hard-to-engage population, as defined by the districts. Districts using these supportive funds have realized successful recruitment and retention. Of 543 school districts in the 1987-88 and 1988-89 school years, 339 and 391, respectively, chose to access the funds. An estimated 11,590 families in 1987-88 and 22,059 families in 1988-89 were served through the parent education programs in the participating school districts.

Families for whom the funds were used were divided into the following categories:

Low Income	Geographically Isolated
Teen Parents	Two Working Parents
Single Parents	English as Second Language
Abusive/Neglectful	Low Functioning Parents
Migrant	Special Needs Children
Transient	Institutionalized Parents

An example of effective strategies one school district employed in providing services for hard-to-reach families, as reported to Missouri's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, reads as follows:

Two of the hard-to-reach families served had special needs children, in addition to other factors which designated them as "hard-to-reach." One of the families has a child with neurological impairment which is manifesting itself in language, speech, motor, and cognitive delays. A second family has a 3-year-old with gross motor and language delays as well as vision concern. Both parents

are developmentally disabled. One-year-old twins in the family have gross motor delays, hearing impairment, and diagnosed epilepsy with grand mal seizures.

Because of the mentioned conditions, the strategy that was most effective for our hard-to-reach families was more frequent home visits. Many more hours were involved in working with these families, as we attempted to help connect their needs with available agency services. Contacts were made with DFS [Department of Family Services], Community Action, Franklin County Board for the Handicapped, Cardinal Glennon Hospital, Head Start, and our Cooperative for Special Education. The empowerment concept has worked in these instances, as the families seem better able to assume their roles as teachers and advocates for their children as they follow through on suggestions and referrals.

During 1988-89, appropriations allowed for 30% of eligible families with children ages birth to 3 to participate. Since 1987-88, additional funds have been provided for parent education and screening for families with 3- and 4-year-old children. The State provides local school districts a base payment for each participating family. Many districts voluntarily enroll more than their state-funded quota of families. Reimbursement has been made available to districts for "hard-to-reach" families.

Statewide expansion has challenged the program to demonstrate its effectiveness in the inner cities, with the rural poor, with adolescent parents, and with other special populations. The Missouri experience has shown that the need for support and assistance in the parenting role crosses all socioeconomic and educational levels. "High-risk" families are attracted to this nontargeted program because it does not imply their inadequacy or incompetence as parents. Their special needs are met through intensified service provided by the local school district.

Although it is delivered by the public schools, PAT has been a public/private partnership from the outset. Its widespread support can be attributed to its many benefits. Health care providers see it as improving children's physical well-being. Mental health, social services, and corrections personnel view it as preventing and reducing abuse and neglect. Churches endorse it as strengthening family life. Businesses see its potential for reducing stress and improving the quality of life for employees. Schools realize the benefits of reducing the need for special and remedial education and of forming a positive relationship with families from early on. Representatives from multiple agencies and organizations serving families of young children sit on each district's PAT Advisory Committee. They are, therefore, in a position to refer families to the program and to serve as referral resources for parents in need of help that is beyond the scope of the PAT program.

PARENTS AS TEACHERS PERSONNEL TRAINING

Each school district selects personnel for training to serve as parent educators in the PAT program offered throughout the state. Qualification for the parent educator position is a background in early childhood education/development, nursing, or social work involving young children and their families. Initial training for state certification occurs after trainees have successfully completed an intensive 30-hour training institute, provided by the Parents As Teachers National Center. Certification follows the final approval of the district's implementation plan for its Parent Education for Families with Children Ages Birth to Three program.

After initial certification, parent educators are credentialed annually, based upon completion of incremented inservice training hours correlated with the number of years a parent educator has served in the program. Ongoing inservice sessions are offered through a comprehensive training program. Bimonthly inservice sessions are held in five designated regions across the state.

Onsite consultations are offered to every school district. Continually updated and newly developed resource materials and assistance opportunities are made available annually to all parent educators. Individual parent educators may request onsite consultations to provide personal training in different program categories. Known as Individualized Inservice Training, a state trainer goes onsite with a parent educator to provide training by:

- Participating in a personal visit conducted by the parent educator and providing follow-up consultation.
- Assisting in conducting a personal visit with a family for whom a specific concern is identified.
- Administering or providing consultation on screening instruments.
- Providing consultation on parent meetings.
- Providing consultation on program organization and operation.
- Providing consultation to a group of parent educators from the same or neighboring districts.
- Consulting with a group specifically in the area of special education.

In 1989 the Early Childhood Special Education Section of the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education set aside funding to implement special education inservice training for parent educators. Issues and topics

addressed during the year encompassed handicapping conditions of children, the scope of needs of families with a handicapped child, and enhancing parents' understanding of diagnostic evaluations.

NATIONAL DISSEMINATION AND PROGRAM REPLICATION

Widespread interest in the Parents As Teachers program is substantiated by the thousands of inquiries that have come from around the world. Professionals from more than 30 states, Canada, Great Britain, and Saudi Arabia have come to Missouri for training in the model. Educators and government officials from as far away as Japan, Australia, and New Zealand have come to Missouri for consultation and observation of the program in operation. Extensive media coverage and awards, including the prestigious Innovations in State and Local Government Award from the Ford Foundation and Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government in 1987, and the Council of State Governments Award in 1988, have increased the program's national visibility.

Representatives from the Harvard University Family Research Project visited Missouri in June, 1989, to review operation of the PAT program and the role it plays within the community and the state. The Missouri Parents As Teachers was one of five family support programs the Harvard team researched throughout the United States. Dr. Richard Harris, senior research analyst from the Harvard Family Research Team, spent time with local programs and with representatives from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Indicating that a national movement for family support seems to be appearing at all levels of government and that strengthening parent's education often helps to strengthen the family, Dr. Harris said:

We are looking at these pioneer programs to help show other states what can be done to support the family. The information we're gathering will be useful to policy makers in other states and on the national level. We've seen that the Parents As Teachers program is a successful one, and one that receives a lot of support at the local level as well as at the state level. I'm impressed with how much it has grown in a short period of time.

The Missouri program often informally helps parents find help and assistance where they need it. It is beginning to diffuse into other agencies, and that is important with any family help group. At the local level, there seems to be a lot of collaboration with other agencies, especially the public health departments. It's very innovative, because it departs dramatically from the classical form of school, and it involves the parents much more than any other

school program. With the parents becoming involved so early, it is expected they will carry their interest in their child into the school years.

The number and scope of requests for information, consultation, and training suggested the appropriateness of developing a center for national dissemination and program expansion. Early in 1987, the Missouri Department of Education established the Parents As Teachers National Center in cooperation with the University of Missouri - St. Louis. The center provides the following services for personnel in Missouri and for professionals from other states and nations:

- PAT institutes on program implementation.
- Inservice workshops and seminars, as well as advanced training in summer.
- Consultation by center staff and program observation and consultation in local school districts.
- Customized training programs outside Missouri by special arrangement.
- Program and materials development and adaptation.
- Research and evaluation activities to further study program effectiveness and to document program adaptations for diverse populations.

In 1988 the National Center designated five regional coordinators to implement regional inservice sessions throughout each region. Regional coordinators and regional training teams, composed of parent educators identified as regional trainers, provided onsite individual inservice training as requested by individual parent educators or school districts.

Outside funding from foundations makes possible the research and national dissemination activities of the National Center. A National Advisory Board, appointed by the Missouri Commissioner of Education, lends direction and support to the center. The Board includes leading educators and child development specialists from across the nation.

FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION

The Parents As Teachers National Center, in cooperation with the Missouri Department of Education, initiated three evaluation research projects following the 1985 pilot project evaluation. The Danforth, Ford, Mailman, and Smith-Richardson Foundations contributed funding for these studies.

The Second Wave Evaluation Study, begun in 1986-87, was designated to investigate the impact of PAT on different

types of families enrolled in 37 diverse school districts. A randomly selected sample of 400 families from the 37 districts includes families varying in residence, marital status, income level, education, and ethnicity. The study looks at parent and child outcomes in a manner similar to the 1985 study. It also examines the impact of different levels of service and parents' participation on the development of children and parents. The evaluation report is to be completed in December 1990.

An 18-month case study of PAT adaptations for disadvantaged urban families in St. Louis was initiated in January 1988. It is anticipated that this report will provide valuable information on program operation in the inner city.

The NPAT Longitudinal Study, begun in 1988-89, tracks the achievement of pilot and comparison-group children in public and private schools in the state. Teachers are asked to complete questionnaires focusing on children's classroom behavior, attendance, achievement, and involvement of parents in the school. Parents are asked to complete questionnaires on their children's feelings about school and their own involvement in their child's schooling and their child's learning at home.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST AND FUTURE

The Missouri experience has shown an ongoing need for the kind of coalition building and marketing that resulted in legislation and state funding for the PAT program. To maintain their advocacy and support, decision makers at local and state levels are informed and involved. As a new initiative, the program documents its benefits and sustains high public visibility.

Offering PAT through the public schools communicates to families that participation will enhance their child's future school achievement. It behooves schools to maintain contact with families and prepare educators to welcome parents as partners in their children's education.

Looking ahead, funds are being sought to conduct qualitative studies addressing the question of program adaptation for distinct populations, including teen parents, bilingual families, and families in poverty, in both urban and rural areas. The challenge of adding new dimensions to curriculum, training, and service delivery, while maintaining the model's integrity, is ever present.

Finally, efforts are under way to strengthen the Parents As Teachers National Center's capacity to respond to requests for information and consultation on shaping public policy for family support and education in the early childhood years.



Mother and daughter interact during a home visit.



John welcomes his parent educator!



Mom meets the needs of both children during home visit.



Parents and children decorate cookies at PAT group meeting.



Father and son work together at group meeting.



Making choices together at PAT group meeting.



Parent educator administers Denver Developmental Screening Test as parent watches.



Child reacts to sound during audiometer testing.



Child responds to parent educator during screening as speech teacher and parent watch.



Parent educator gets to know child before screening procedure begins.



Nurse adjusts headphones in preparation for hearing screening.



Parents discuss "what's new" since the last home visit.

DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING

The Early Childhood Development Act of 1984 provides each family with children ages 1 through kindergarten entry an opportunity to participate in developmental screenings offered through each school district. The goals of the screening programs are to review a child's development, to identify possible delays, physical problems, and advanced abilities, and to give parents information and guidance regarding their child's development. The areas screened at each age level are: language, personal-social development, fine and gross motor skills, hearing, vision, and health and physical development. The screenings can be administered in the home as a component of the home visit for PAT families, through scheduled appointments, or through large-scale screenings. District service delivery options are illustrated in Table 1.

Criteria for the selection of the screening instruments are detailed for school districts: The instruments chosen and administered must be:

1. Reliable.
2. Valid.

TABLE 1
Screening Delivery Options as Reported by
School Districts Implementing Missouri's
Early Childhood Development Act of 1984

(as reported to Missouri Department of
Elementary and Secondary Education)

Screening Program for Children Ages 1 and 2	Delivery System	1986-87	1987-88	1988-89
	Large-scale screening	206	229	270
	Scheduled appointments	212	213	248
	As a component of parent education program	272	295	352
	Other	7	8	20
Screening Program for Children 3 and 4	Large-scale screening	—	275	323
	Scheduled appointments	—	229	275
	Other	—	27	35

3. Easily administered.

4. Approved by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Screening instruments are administered by parent educators who have received training in the instruments, along with educators, psychologists, speech/language clinicians, and school nurses or other health care professionals. After the screening, parents immediately receive the results and interpretations of the screening findings. At the conference with parents, the results are explained, any suspected problems or delays are identified, and the child's hearing and vision tests are discussed. Parents of children ages 3 and 4 also are apprised of possible advanced abilities in a child. The screener offers suggestions for activities or materials parents may wish to use at home to encourage appropriate development. Referrals are offered, when warranted, as the screener is a representative of the educational system and works in collaboration with many professionals to provide services for families and children that best meet their needs as indicated by the screening results.

Screening information is kept at the district level as part of the child's cumulative school records until the child reaches the third grade. Districts report to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education at the end of each program year. Results from those yearly reports are shown in Table 2. Identification of children for early intervention increases their potential for enhanced academic achievement in later school years.

SERVICE DELIVERY

As a parent educator delivers services to a family, several basic assumptions about families are taken into consideration. Recognizing that all parents want to be good parents and that all parents need support based upon the family's needs, support programs increase families' abilities to cope rather than provide a system upon which families become dependent. The basic assumptions are:

- Information on child development assists parents in their parenting role.
- Support in the first years of life serves a prevention function.
- Availability of social networks, mutual aid, and peer groups is essential to the family's ability to enhance the child's development.
- The family is part of the community; therefore, support is provided through links with community resources.

TABLE 2
Developmental Screening Programs
Through Missouri's Early Childhood
Development Act of 1984

(as reported to Missouri Department of
 Elementary and Secondary Education)

	Possible Language Delays	Possible Motor Delays	Possible Vision Problems	Possible Hearing Problems	Possible Physical Delays	Possible Advanced Abilities	Total # of Children Served
Screening Program for Children Ages 1 and 2	2,436	904	696	3,000	1,343	—	36,617
	2,031	939	628	2,789	1,332	—	31,216
	1,522	674	445	2,431	811	—	22,746
	1,448	—	432	1,837	695	—	14,229
Screening Program for Children 3 and 4	7,558	6,232	2,862	5,840	2,164	4,952	62,148
	6,077	4,759	1,918	4,781	1,419	2,988	45,852
	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

- Support enables parents to build the confidence required to manage their lives.
- Families will be involved if the support makes sense to them.
- Families will be involved if they participate in decision making and get good feedback.
- Families will feel best when the support is specific and they can see direct application.

The PAT program offered to eligible families across Missouri consists of a minimum of four private visits and four group meetings. Parent educators provide information on child development and help parents become informed observers of their children. Parents' concerns and questions are responded to in a timely fashion. Information and materials pertinent to the child's developmental stages are provided to the parents.

The personal visit or home visit is a key component of Parents As Teachers. Observing the parent and child in their natural setting enables the professional to personalize the input to the family. The purpose and content of the personal visit varies throughout the time a family participates in the program.

Developmental information that the parent educators deliver to parents is specific and easily observable. The activities sug-

gested can be done easily in the context of everyday living experiences and do not require expensive or elaborate materials. The interactions supported should be fun, comfortable, and applicable to the daily interactions between parents and their children. The materials and advice adopted by the parent educators are those that best meet the needs, concerns, and beliefs of each family and are based on the child's developmental stage. Parents are valued as their child's first and most important teachers.

Following each personal visit, the parent educator completes a brief report of the visit, covering the content of the visit, issues the parents brought up, and general comments and plans for the next personal visit.

In evaluations mailed to parents at the end of each program year, parents have rated the personal visit as their favorite segment of the PAT program, often citing the time spent with their parent educator and the support given them in their parenting skills as the reason. When questioned, "What are the benefits of the Parents As Teachers program?" these parents responded:

Gene: "Peace of mind. I found a support group who shares the same situations I do. Parent educators give professional advice, ways to make our child's life safe, emotionally happy, and intellectually stimulating. Parenting is the most important thing we do. There is no training. Belonging to Parents As Teachers is the best thing parents can do for themselves and for their child." (Gene and his wife are parents of children age 3 years and age 5 months.)

Sharon: "I'm able to communicate with someone who lets me know the reasons why Janelle is doing what she does at different stages. I've learned safety tips and good nutrition for my child. I needed to know that. This helps me get in contact with people in (my district). When Janelle is ready to start school, I have someone who knows me personally and will help me." (Sharon and her husband are the parents of a child age 11 months.)

Nancy: "I can't say enough good about it. It made me aware of different things to look for developmentally, things I might not have noticed. It helped me to know my frustrations are shared by other parents. Group meetings offer encouragement and support, but my favorite part is the home visit. My parent educator has become a good friend. She has made me more confident. Parenting is more fun." (Nancy and her husband are the parents of children age 3 years and age 3 months.)

Group meetings are arranged so that parents meet with other parents who have children in the same age grouping (e.g., all parents of children ages 24-36 months meet together). Programs are offered to further inform and enhance the developmental information used in the home visit. Guest speakers, parent-child interactive programs, community resource individuals, make-and-take workshops, and parent-

led discussions are some of the formats used in the group meetings. Child care usually is provided, and a portion of each group meeting is devoted to observing interactions of the children in the child care area.

At the group meetings parents meet other parents with children who are at similar developmental stages. Parents find that they are not alone, that behaviors described by other parents are the same as their own experiences, and that open communication exists between home and school. Records maintained on group meetings include attendance, content covered, issues parents raise and a general appraisal of how the lecture, audiovisual presentation, or printed materials were received.

Participation in the personal visits, the group meetings, and the early childhood screenings creates a strong bond between the parent educator and the family. When the time arrives for the family to exit the programs to begin formal education in a private or public school, this bond translates into a partnership with the school, a desire to be actively involved in their child's educational process. Parents will have become accustomed to communicating with an educator and in actively teaching their children. Educational institutions can anticipate strong interest in parents participating in educational decisions involving their child.

PARENTS AS TEACHERS TELECONFERENCE

On May 25, 1989, Parents As Teachers sponsored and presented a 2½-hour teleconference, "Working With Families of Infants with At-Risk and Handicapping Conditions." Working with the Missouri School Board Association Education Satellite Network (ESN), a Midlands Consortium Star Schools Project, a committee was formed consisting of media experts representing the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and ESN, as well as representatives from the Parents As Teachers National Center, a Parents As Teachers program, the Special Learning Center, Early Childhood Special Education, and the Region C Coordinator of Parents As Teachers. The goal of this committee was to present, as a first-time effort, a statewide teleconference primarily for parent educators in Missouri, disseminating information in the area of special education that would inform parent educators and enhance parent educators' abilities in delivering services to families with children having at-risk and handicapping conditions.

It was decided to air the teleconference from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's audiovisual studio and link up with 26 satellite sites through-

out the state of Missouri. Regional coordinators and specified parent educators served as site facilitators together with site technical coordinators provided by ESN. Sites were selected in various areas of the state to eliminate the need to travel long distances to view the teleconference. The format consisted of one hour featuring a keynote speaker, with time to call in questions directed to the keynote speaker, and one hour featuring a panel of parents of special needs children, with time to call in questions directed to those parents. In addition to the 26 Missouri sites, approximately 10 states accessed the program for viewing and call-in questions. A moderator expedited the program.

Descriptions of the Parents As Teachers and the First Steps programs opened the telecast. In 1988, Missouri introduced the First Steps program to serve families with infants considered to be at-risk at birth. Currently in its pilot stages the First Steps program identifies children born in selected birthing hospitals and links the family to a case manager who coordinates the agencies available to provide the services these children and their families need. The Parents As Teachers program works closely with the First Steps program and its case managers to offer and provide services to these families. The First Steps case manager and PAT program coordinators make periodic follow-up contacts to assure that families are being contacted and offered services from the PAT programs.

Working with families of premature infants presents special challenges for the parent educator. The birth of any baby is an anticipated event, and as the pregnancy progresses, thoughts and ideas of this new little person begin to formulate, especially in the expectant mother. Typically parents look forward to a normal baby, perhaps not unlike the image of the "Gerber" baby. When something causes the baby to be born earlier than planned, everything changes and the parents are shocked. If the baby is admitted to a neonatal unit, many adjustments are ahead for the parents. Parent educators begin working with families in the last trimester of pregnancy and the need to be supportive at this time is critical.

Dr. Sessions Cole, Director of Newborn Medicine Services, St. Louis Children's Hospital, and Associate Professor of Pediatrics and Cell Biology, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, served as keynote speaker for the teleconference. In discussing the role of a parent educator serving a family with an at-risk infant, Dr. Cole stated:

There is no promise of perfection around any child, and that's especially dramatized around children who have been through neonatal intensive care. However, the medical literature has now identified the fact through several studies that interventions like

those carried out by Parents-As-Teachers can be extremely influential in improving, for example, communication skills and mother-infant interaction within families, and specifically improving Bayley Mental scores, which is an infant kind of intelligence quotient score, as well as home environment ratings and infant temperament scores. Therefore, your (parent educators') interventions are at least as important as the things that we do around the time that the babies are born, in optimizing their long-term outcome and outcomes of their families.

The parent educator helping the family of a premature infant uses the same techniques as with any other family. Parent educators especially recognize three specific basics around which to build interactions with this family:

1. The parent educator works hard at being a good listener.
2. The parent educator counsels with the family and serves as a support system for the family, especially reassuring the parents that their feelings are valid.
3. The parent educator redirects family observations into the baby's positive actions, no matter how small the positive point may be. By doing so, the family and the parent educator identify and align themselves with the baby's positive accomplishments.

The parent educator may help families understand their responses to the situation that presents itself. Helping the family recognize the commonality of responses to their situation tells them that their response is normal. Being patient with the family as it moves through the stages of acceptance of the premature baby affords the parent educator many opportunities to help the family.

Sandy McCurdy, the mother of a son with Cornelia De Lange syndrome, observed that parents need to learn to accept children for what they are and what they come with. Parents repeatedly experience grief and guilt as they move through the cycles of development in anticipation of where the child will be when they (the parents) are no longer here or that this child will never experience typical milestones such as high school graduation, marriage, or leaving home. Therefore, the parent educator must be sensitive to parents' ongoing need to process these feelings of guilt and grief.

When asked how they became involved in Parents as Teachers, Mrs. McCurdy replied, "Our daughter was already in the Parents As Teachers program, so we signed him up before birth, so we were able to have the support from the beginning." When asked how her parent educator adapts the home visit to meet the needs of this child, her reply was:

One of the main ways is she tries to suggest things that will help stimulate his vision and hearing and just ways that we might deal with problems. Right now we're dealing with head banging a lot, and so the last time I talked with (our parent educator) she offered some suggestions about that. It sort of depends on where we are and what our needs are. I think that's important for any parent educator to realize—that parents need help in understanding where their kids are developmentally, oftentimes, and for them to be able to recommend stimulation that is appropriate for that level of development is very, very important.

When administering screening instruments, the parent educator adjusts the developmental timeline for each premature child. Each child is evaluated from the original expected birth date instead of the actual birth date. For Carol Strong, mother of a 4-year-old son with spina bifida, the Parents As Teachers screening was especially helpful. When asked about how PAT screening has helped her son, Mrs. Strong responded:

We've been going to Parents As Teachers since he was about a year old. He's been screened at least once or twice a year through Parents As Teachers, and last year during the screening they (parent educators) decided that there might be a chance that he had a visual impairment. So we took him to see a doctor, and they (Parents As Teachers) were very accurate and he did need glasses. He has come leaps and bounds since he got his glasses in the past year. He has learned to write his name—do all sorts of things. We thought he was going to be slow from the beginning because he was not interested in doing those things and as it turns out, a lot of it was just because he was sight-impaired.

Participants' evaluations of the teleconference revealed a strong interest in PAT from states that accessed the program and strong praise from the Missouri sites for providing this kind of training to parent educators. School administrators, First Steps case managers, staff from Regional diagnostic centers, and hospital and clinic personnel viewed the program, in addition to the parent educators. As a result of the success of this first-time effort, future teleconferences may be planned.

SUMMARY

Missouri's early childhood parent education and screening programs have made available continuing services from birth until the child enters formal schooling. These nontargeted programs are designed to support all families through services, resources, and referrals based upon individual family needs. Home visits, group meetings, and early childhood developmental screenings make up three components of Missouri's Early Childhood Development Act of 1984 (Senate Bill 658).

The success of Missouri's project, Parents As Teachers, is grounded in the belief that parents are the first and most

important teachers of children and that children will learn more during the early years than at any other time in life. Missouri is committed to the future of Early Childhood and of Parents As Teachers. In October 1989, strong support emerged in the final report of the Governors Advisory Council on Literacy. Entitled "Jobs Without People: The Coming Crisis for Missouri's Workforce," the report focused on three recommendations, for the early years, the school years, and the adult years. The recommendations are supported by 30 specific action plans, three of which identify areas specifically noted in this article. The Early Years focus identified:

- Expanding the Parents As Teachers program and involving families in education.
- Better efforts for prenatal care and identification of young children at risk.
- Expanding the First Steps program.

Educators in Missouri's schools may anticipate greater interaction with parents who have participated in the PAT program. Educators need to be prepared to enjoy the partnership in education that is now developing from the positive exposure parents are experiencing through empowerment of families as designers of their child's world, from the support that parent educators as representatives of the public schools give to these families, and from successful teaching by parents of their own children.

RESOURCES

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For further information on Missouri's parent education and screening programs contact:

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
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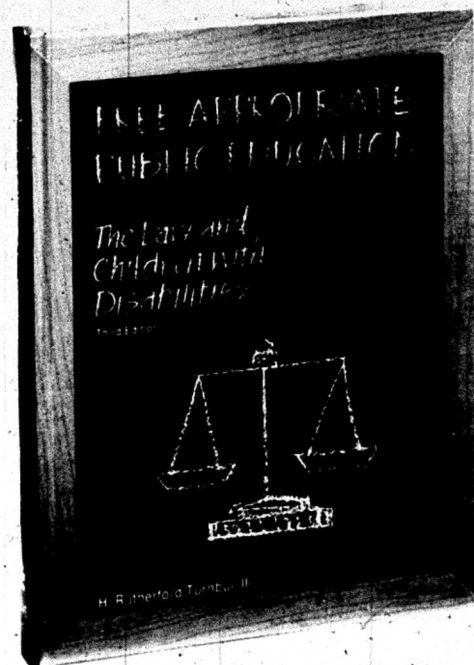
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