

Responses to Mahoney et al.

Placing Parent Education in Conceptual and Empirical Context

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Mahoney et al. (in this issue) have made the observation that parent education in early intervention has come into disfavor and proceeded to build a straw man for arguing why this is so, and why there is a need for renewed emphasis on parent education and training. I am in full agreement with the authors on this latter point, but disagree vehemently with many of the authors' contentions about the reasons why parent education is not a more explicit focus of contemporary early intervention practices.

At the outset, it is important to note that when Mahoney et al. (in this issue) used the term *early intervention*, they meant the Part B (619) and Part C Programs under the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990 (IDEA), as evidenced by their responses to IFSPs and P.L. 94-142, and not early intervention as more broadly defined and practiced in the United States (Dunst, 1996). This is important, because parent education is a key feature of many other contemporary approaches to early intervention and education (e.g., Powell, 1988, 1989; Wandersman, 1987; Weiss, 1987). I make this point because I shall argue that one of Mahoney et al.'s contentions regarding the reasons why parent education has come into disfavor is not supported by activity in non-Part C early intervention fields.

Mahoney et al.'s (in this issue) case for why parent education is not a major focus of early intervention has been built around two major arguments and contentions. The first concerns a set of historical criticisms levied

against parent education, which according to Mahoney et al. have contributed "to the decline of parent education" (p. 133). The second is the contention that alternative approaches to early intervention have done the same, and somehow are the sources and factors that have brought parent education into disfavor. I will only briefly point out the faulty logic and noteworthy omissions regarding the first line of argument. I take more time on their second point, illustrating empirically how wrong they are and how damaging and divisive their unfounded contentions could be to the early intervention field.

CRITICISMS OF PARENT EDUCATION

According to Mahoney et al. (in this issue), five criticisms levied against parent education by others have contributed to why parent education, at least in part, has come into disfavor. After reviewing these criticisms, they proceed to dismiss the arguments by stating that "there have been surprisingly few empirical studies of the extent to which parents actually experience parent education as culturally biased, resulting in an undesired burden, implying blame, or interfering with their primary role as parents" (p. 133). The contention that there is little research to support these assertions is simply not true. For example, Dunst, Leet, and Trivette (1988) studied the relationship between the adequacy of different kinds of fam-

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ily resources (financial, time, childcare, etc.) and the burden of implementing professionally recommended child-level interventions. The study was conducted specifically to test assertions by early intervention professionals that parents were noncompliant, resistant, uncooperative, and uncaring (because they didn't do what professionals instructed them to do). The investigators found that inadequacies in resources (lack of money, childcare, basic resources, etc.) unrelated to early intervention were associated with a lower probability of interest in and commitment to parent implementation of early intervention. More damaging to Mahoney et al.'s contention are the data from some 125 articles reviewed by Caplan and Hall-McCorquodale (1985), in which mothers were found to be blamed for some 72 different kinds of child psychopathology! If this does not demonstrate explicit blaming, I cannot imagine what would.

Many of the articles cited by Mahoney et al. (in this issue) as sources of criticism against parent education, and on which they attempted to build their case, are contradictory; therefore, using these sources as evidence for their arguments is weak at best. It must be remembered that Mahoney et al.'s arguments about the decline in parent education pertained to Part C early intervention with children with disabilities or delays, whereas they cited many sources concerning at-risk children, who would not be eligible for Part C early intervention in most states. On reading their comments, I was reminded of an article by Foster, Berger, and McLean (1981) who noted that

Many of the (disabled) children now served by early intervention programs come from middle- or upper-income families . . . Models of parent involvement predicated on a cultural deficit hypothesis are not easily applied to those families, *whose (positive) interaction patterns were the very standard against which low-income family styles were compared and found wanting.* (p. 57, italics added)

What Mahoney et al. overlooked in trying to build their case for the decline in parent education is that they were using arguments made by others about children and families who for the most part are not served by Part C early interventions to argue their own case about children with disabilities and their families. They cannot have it both ways, because Foster et al.'s contentions are as true today as they were nearly 2 decades ago.

I agree with Mahoney et al. (in this issue) that parent education is not at the forefront of Part C early intervention practices (as it should be, depending on how it is done), but I see no reason to revisit history to build support for their argument when evidence points inextricably to one factor for the current state of affairs—namely, a recent change in the Part C legislation and how

states define and fund early intervention. The original Part H definition (Education for All Handicapped Children Act Amendments of 1986) included parent training as a component of early intervention, whereas the Part C amendments (IDEA Amendments of 1997) define early intervention as child and family *services*. As states moved toward full implementation, they have developed or relied on funding approaches that emphasize professionally provided services (because they are reimbursable) and put less emphasis on parent training and education (because they are less likely to be reimbursable). Part C early intervention has become a service industry that has more to do with the provision of professional services and less to do with what makes a real difference in the lives of children and families (including parent education). That the decline in parent education in Part C early intervention programs is attributable to the program itself is supported by the lack of a concurrent decline in emphasis on parent education in non-Part C early intervention programs (see Powell, 1989, chapter 4).

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO WORKING WITH FAMILIES

Mahoney et al. (in this issue) have taken direct aim at family-centered practices and an ecological-social support approach to early intervention as reasons for the decline in parent education, arguing that these frameworks for structuring and delivering early intervention somehow distract from parent education, although their article was a bit schizophrenic on these points. Later in the article, the authors argued just the opposite by stating that “parent education is philosophically compatible with family-centered approaches to early intervention” (p. 135).

Family-Centered Practices

Putting aside the fact that Mahoney et al. (in this issue) seemed unable to decide what they believed about the relationship between family-centered practices and parent education, I want to illustrate conceptually and empirically that family-centered practices, parenting supports (including parent education), and parent judgments about child progress are interdependent in logical, predictable, and conceptually meaningful ways. I illustrate this with data on 575 parents of children participating in Part C and Part B(619) early intervention programs in Pennsylvania. These parents completed a survey about their experiences in early intervention (Time 1) and rated parenting supports and child progress 6 months later (Time 2). Separating the Time 1 and Time 2 data in real time was done to eliminate any statistical problems associated with the temporal codependencies that so often plague cross-sectional studies.

Information gathered on the surveys was used to code family social economic status (SES), child diagnosis (where a higher score indicated that a child had more severe disabilities), program location (home-based vs. center-based, or a combination), number of child services provided (physical therapy, special instruction, etc.), frequency of provision of the child services per week, hours of early intervention program staff contact with the parents per month, parent personal control appraisals about receiving desired early intervention program services, and family-centered practices. Family-centered practices included ratings of program philosophy (Dunst, 1995, 1997) and practitioner helpgiving (Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Dunst, Trivette, & Hamby, 1996). At Time 2, participants rated the extent to which parenting supports from early intervention practitioners provided them with four types of assistance and advice about teaching and improving their children's development and functioning (information about child development, instructional

practices/methods, etc.) and indicated whether their children made more or less progress than they expected in five developmental domains as a result of participation in early intervention. (The parenting supports items assessed several of the things Mahoney et al. identified as the content of parent education in their Table 1.) The data were analyzed by EQS structural equation modeling (Bentler, 1992), testing a model that has emerged from various lines of research attempting to understand the ecology of early intervention programs and practices (Dunst, Brookfield, & Epstein, 1998; Dunst & Trivette, 1988, 1996; Dunst, Trivette, Hamby, & Pollock, 1990; Trivette, Dunst, Boyd, & Hamby, 1996; Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 1996a, 1996b).

The EQS results are shown in Figure 1. The fit statistics were between .88 and .92, indicating that the model was supported by the relationships among the observed data. In the interest of clarity, only significant path coefficients are shown on the path diagram (although every

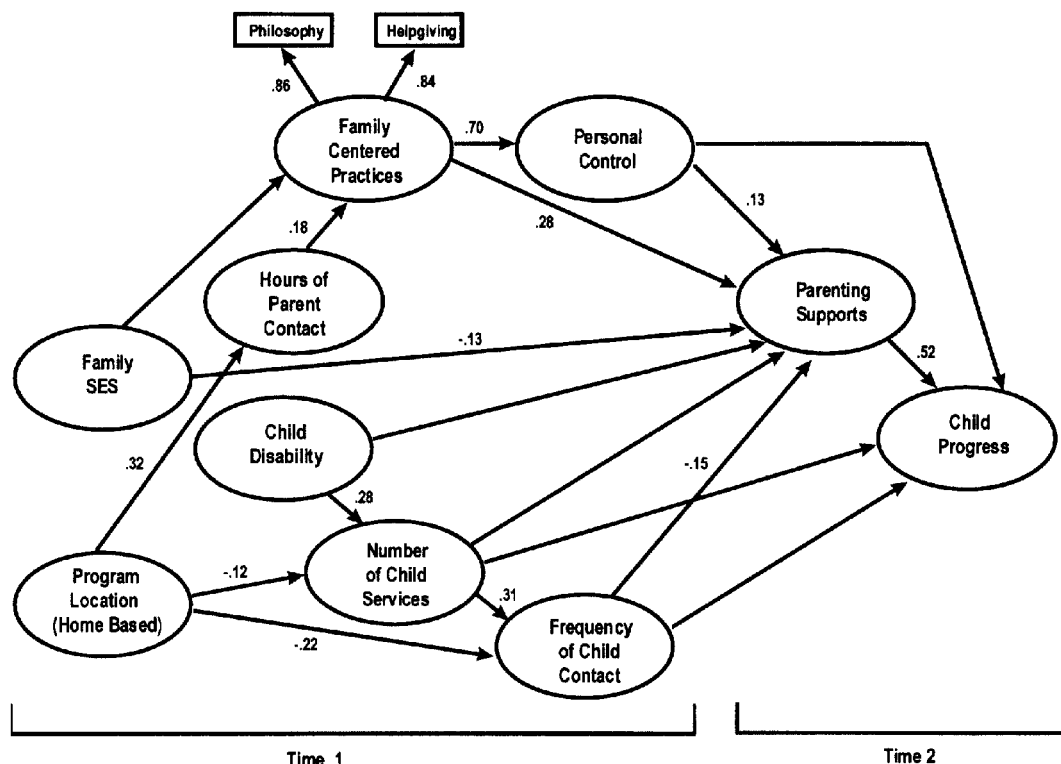


FIGURE 1. Structural equation modeling results depicting the relationships between child and family variables, early intervention program structural and process variables, and parenting supports and parent judgments about child progress. ($N = 475$ parents).

path shown was included in the model tested). The *only* measures positively related to parenting supports and parent judgments about child progress were the family-centered practices and personal control appraisal measures as evidenced by the path coefficients between both predictor variables and parenting supports (in contrast, the structural early intervention program measures—both directly and indirectly—were negatively related [as was family SES] to parenting supports and child progress). On the one hand, these data demonstrate that family-centered practices and parenting supports (including parent education) are empirically related; on the other hand, they refute Mahoney et al.'s (in this issue) contentions that these approaches somehow are competing approaches to early intervention. Simply put, parenting supports provided in a family-centered manner contribute to whether or not parents attribute child benefits to early intervention.

Family Support Approach

Mahoney et al. (in this issue) argued that the social systems model described by Dunst, Trivette, and Jodry (1996; see also Dunst & Trivette, 1997) was yet another factor contributing to the decline in parent education, because my colleagues and I supposedly claimed that social support is a substitute for parent education. What we actually said was that parent education is a particular kind of parenting support (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1994)—one of a number of supports that families require (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988) to have the time and energy, and the knowledge and skills, to carry out parenting responsibilities. The problem with Mahoney et al.'s position is their failure to recognize and acknowledge that there is life outside of early intervention and that the experiences and opportunities afforded children and their parents can have development-instigating consequences beyond those attributable to early intervention (Dunst & Trivette, 1997). I illustrate this with data from a prospective longitudinal study of 240 pregnant women observed twice prenatally and at 1, 6, and 12 months postpartum (Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 1996c). The purpose of the study included the evaluation of the social systems model described by Dunst, Trivette, and Jodry (1996). The analysis presented here included measures of family SES and three dimensions of social support (psychological closeness, dependability of support, and satisfaction with support; see Dunst, & Trivette, 1990) obtained prenatally, two measures of maternal personal well-being (see Trivette et al., 1996c) taken at 1 month postpartum, two dimensions of parenting interactional styles (facilitating and directive; Mahoney, Powell, & Finger, 1986) measured at 6 months postpartum, and Bayley (1969) scale Mental Development Index and Psychomotor Development Index scores obtained at 12 months postpartum.

The measures were carefully selected for the present analysis, so that artifactual temporal codependencies were eliminated as factors explaining relationships among the variables. The data were analyzed by structured equation modeling (Bentler, 1992) testing the model shown in Figure 2. The social support and family SES measures were correlated because they were obtained concurrently in real time. The nonsignificant paths (those shown without path coefficients) were eliminated from the model because they were not necessary for explaining the observed relationships. The fit statistics for the final model tested were between .85 and .90, indicating an adequate fit between the model and the data.

With regard to the purpose of this article, my comments on the EQS findings are limited to two things. First, the hypothesized relationships among the variables (Dunst et al., 1996) are supported by the findings, demonstrating that social support, personal well-being, parenting interactional styles, and child development are both conceptually and empirically related, and that social support and well-being as intervening variables account for variation in child development beyond that attributable to family SES. Second, the findings refute Mahoney et al.'s (in this issue) contention that Dunst, Trivette, and Jodry (1996) model does not acknowledge the fact that child development is influenced by parenting knowledge and childrearing skills. On the contrary, this has been a major feature of the model and our research on it (see Dunst & Trivette, 1988). As the findings in Figure 2 clearly show, parenting styles are influenced by other factors, and parenting styles in turn influence child development.

CONCLUSIONS

At the outset, I made the point that I agreed with Mahoney et al. (in this issue) that there is indeed a need for a renewed focus on parent education in early intervention. A renewed focus with an emphasis on how parent education operates to produce desired effects could not but be beneficial theoretically, empirically, and practically. However, I found their arguments about why there has been a decline in emphasis on parent education poorly constructed, unconvincing, divisive, and potentially damaging. Notwithstanding Mahoney et al.'s eventual attempts to bridge family-centered practices and parent education, pitting parent education against other approaches to conceptualizing early intervention was neither warranted nor necessary for making the points that Mahoney et al. tried to make.

I want to conclude by briefly describing a model that brings together the best of different approaches to conceptualizing early intervention and that integrates rather than disconnects the different approaches that Mahoney

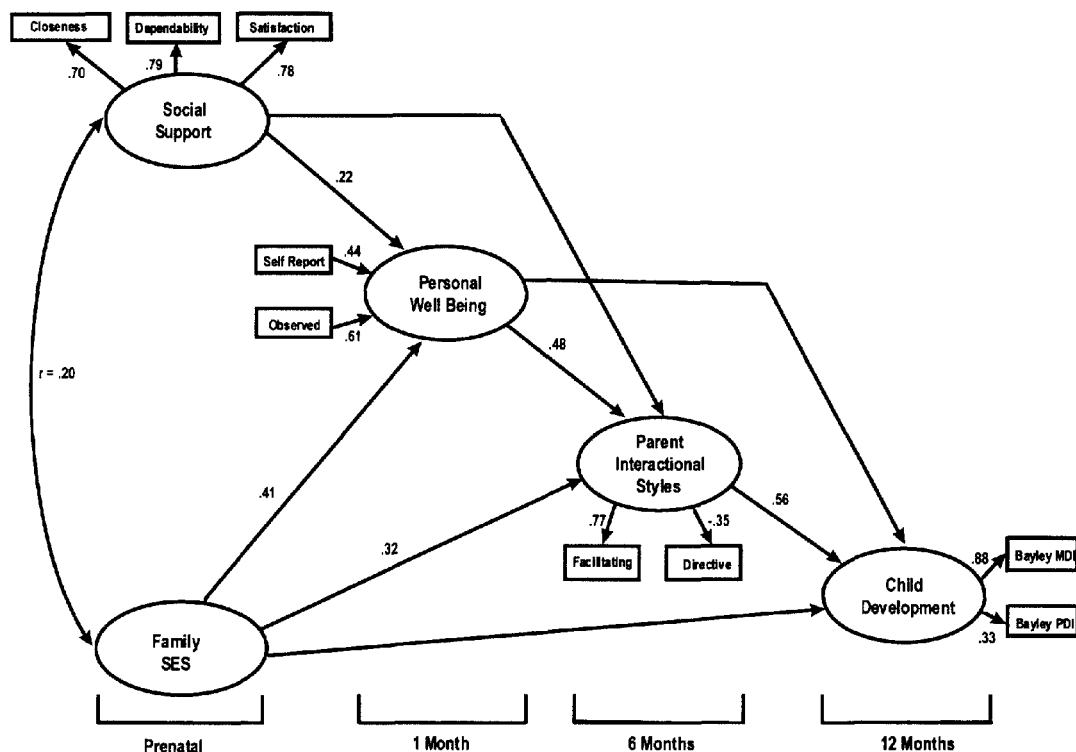


FIGURE 2. Structural equation modeling results depicting the relationships between family SES, social support, parent personal well-being, parenting styles of interaction, and two child development measures. ($N = 240$ mothers and their children).

et al. (in this issue) attempted to convince us were somehow incompatible and competing. The model, shown in Figure 3, depicts how four different but conceptually and empirically related dimensions of early intervention go together in a coherent manner. According to this model, early intervention encompasses development-instigating learning opportunities for young children and parenting and family/community supports provided in a family-centered manner aimed at optimizing positive effects on child, parent, and family functioning. Development-instigating learning opportunities include—but are not limited to—those that are interesting and engaging, are competency enhancing and functional, and promote acquisition of child capabilities in the context of family and community activity settings. Parenting supports include the information, advice, guidance, parent education, and so forth, that strengthen and promote the knowledge and skills of parents to provide their children with development-instigating and development-enhancing learning oppor-

tunities. Family/community supports include financial, psychological, physical, and other kinds of resources necessary for parents to have the time and energy to attend to and carry out parenting responsibilities. Provision and mobilization of child learning opportunities, parenting supports, and family supports are done in a family-centered manner to maximize the benefits of early intervention. Whereas the three overlapping circles in Figure 3 focus on *what* is done, family-centered practices emphasize *how* interventions are conducted.

The model shown in Figure 3 brings together diverse but complementary perspectives of early intervention, and the relationships among the key features of the different approaches are conceptually and empirically supported by research evidence. The model places in proper context how parent education fits into early intervention and illustrates that building a conceptual and empirical foundation is the best way to achieve advances in our understanding of early intervention. ♦

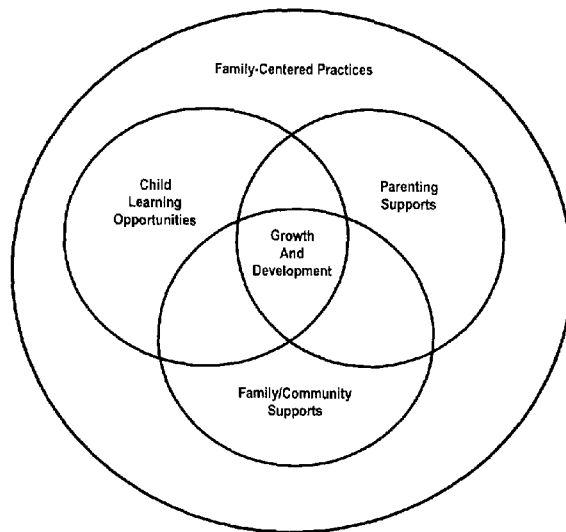


FIGURE 3. An integrated model for depicting the relationships between four dimensions of early intervention practices.

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Parent Education: What We Mean and What That Means

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Parent education may be confronted by an important service dilemma. On the one hand, the interactions between parents and their children seem to be an important mediator of the effects of intervention on child outcomes (Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie, 1998; Mahoney, Boyce, Fewell, & Wheeden, 1998). On the other hand, parent education in early intervention may be receiving less attention than it did in the past (Mahoney et al., in this issue). This dilemma is complicated by the fact that early interventionists perceive themselves to be doing parent education (Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie, 1998; McBride & Peterson, 1997), whereas parents want it (Mahoney & Filer, 1996) but do not think that it is occurring (Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie, 1998; McBride & Peterson, 1997). This is not a trivial dilemma for the field. Parent involvement in the education of their children is receiving increasing national attention at all levels from infancy to high school. Moreover, parent involvement has been a cornerstone of early childhood special education (ECSE) since its inception as a field in the mid-1970s.

The assertion by Mahoney et al. (in this issue) that parent education is no longer a part of our research agenda as a field, or of what we are teaching future pro-

fessionals to do, was based on a perusal of recent ECSE textbooks and journals. To confirm this assertion for myself, I conducted my own cursory inspection of the ECSE textbooks and journals in my office. The introductory methods texts in ECSE almost all had chapters related to *families*, using chapter titles such as "Family Needs and Services," "Working in Partnership with Families," "Family and Professional Collaboration," "Family Systems," and "Creating Family-Centered Practices and Policies." *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1988) defines *education* as the process of training and developing knowledge, skill, mind, and character (p. 431) and *educational* as "giving instruction or information" (p. 432). The idea of *expert* is inherent in these definitions, as is the idea of *change*: to educate means to convey knowledge, skills, or attitudes from expert to novice. In ECSE, the term *parent education* would clearly connote efforts to provide parents with information or change their actions. Carrying this thought a step further, if one thinks of eligibility for early childhood services under Part B and Part C as being based primarily on child characteristics, one might expect that parent education would refer to providing parents with information or changing parents' actions on behalf of the child (as in teaching parents