I. Background Statement

The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) believes that "for children and youth to be successful from birth through adolescence, there must be an array of learning supports around them." These learning supports include families. HFRP calls the network of supports "complementary learning." HFRP goes on to identify three family involvement processes that aid in fostering healthy outcomes: parenting education, home-school relationships and responsibility for learning outcomes.

If we know that the first five years of life is critical to the child's development, then what we do to support families is also critical to building a long-lasting home-school-community connection that improves child and family outcomes.

In 2002, the Family Literacy Support Network (FLSN) at the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) was created by a contract from First 5 LA under their family literacy initiative. Over the years, FLSN has worked to build the capacity of schools and community-based organizations in delivering quality family literacy programs that include parenting education as one of four key components that lead to school readiness for young children, and attainment of family goals for participating parents.

II. FLSN’s Definition of Parenting Education

FLSN and First 5 LA-funded family literacy programs used the following definition of Parent Education as one of the components of a comprehensive, four-component family literacy model. The definition was written in FLSN’s A Framework for Continuous Quality Improvement in Family Literacy Programs (2005), the definition reads:

"Parent Education supports children’s literacy development, both affective and cognitive, and early educational success."

First 5 LA family literacy grantees must support parents in recognizing the importance of providing their children with language and literacy-rich experiences at home, so their children will be ready for school and prepared for educational and life success.

Over the last six years, with input from family literacy parenting educators and research, FLSN has expanded
its definition of parent education to include a more holistic understanding of what it takes to assist adults in their ongoing role as a parent and a child’s first and most important teacher. FLSN’s definition promotes parenting education as an on-going, evolving process that supports adults in their role as parents. Today, FLSN’s definition reads:

“Parenting Education empowers parents with the capacity and confidence necessary to nurture healthy relationships; to support their child’s development (social, emotional, cognitive, and physical); to access and navigate community systems; and to increase their leadership and advocacy skills in support of their family, school, and community.”

III. Characteristics of a Quality Parenting Education Program

Based on research, practice, and FLSN’s recent focus group findings with First 5 LA family literacy parenting instructors, the following eight (8) characteristics were identified as key to providing quality parenting education. Several of the characteristics identified below are aligned to one or more of the following frameworks: 1) Strengthening Families Protective Factors by the Center for the Study of Social Policy; 2) The National Extension Education Parent Model, (1992); and 3) Head Start Relationship Based Competencies for Staff and Supervisors Who Work With Families.

A. FLSN’s characteristics of quality parenting education include:

1. The “right” staff

Identify staff with professional, personal, and process skills that show a keen interest for supporting and working with parents. Professional skills for a competent parenting educator include: background in adult learning theory and early childhood education, strong community leadership and advocacy skills. Personal traits desired include: compassionate, empathetic, open-minded, non-judgmental, sincere, patient, a sense of humor, flexible, and respectful of diverse families. The ability to communicate in the language of the dominant parent group is helpful. Process traits might include a good listener, facilitator and coach, as well as knowledge of marketing and evaluation. A strong parenting educator would also have her/his firm beliefs on parenting and understand how it effects the way they relate to parents. Additionally, it is important that the parenting educator have a commitment to professional growth, demonstrated by attending professional development opportunities, staying current with research and best practices, and networking and sharing with others in the field of parenting education. (Framework: The National Extension Education Parent Model, 1992.)

2. Adequate space, time, and resources to meet the needs and interests specified by the parents

Designate a common meeting space, area, or even a bulletin board dedicated to sharing information with parents. Offer instruction that is of sufficient intensity and duration to achieve long-lasting changes in parenting attitudes and behaviors, based on agency and community resources available. For example, First 5 LA family literacy grantees offer a minimum of 10 hours a month of parenting education and 10 hours of parent and child interactive literacy activities. The time commitment should match the needs and interests of parents and be supported by community partners and/or adequate funding. According to Kumpfer (1999), at least 30-40 contact hours are needed for a positive and long lasting impact of family programs. The allocated space should create a stimulating environment that promotes a safe zone for parents to share and receive education and information, and to reflect and share about their experiences as parents.

3. A parent needs/interest assessment and goal setting

It is essential that the program content be aligned with the family’s cultural beliefs and parental expectations and this can be confirmed by a needs assessment conducted either formally or informally. Once needs are identified, it is important that the staff respond in a timely manner by gathering the community partners and/or resources required to address the interests and needs expressed. FLSN suggests the following categories for the needs assessment:

a) nurturing healthy parent-child relationships (e.g. positive discipline, motivating children)

b) learning about child development (All domains: social, emotional, cognitive, and physical)

c) navigating community systems (e.g. school systems, community resources)

d) obtaining leadership and advocacy skills (e.g. public speaking, time management, team building, problem-solving)

Once needs/interests are identified, it is suggested that program staff work with families to establish reasonable expectations and goals. First 5 LA family literacy grantees
usually start parents with goal setting for their children and their family, then move parents to setting goals for their own educational goals and interests.

4. A strengths-based approach

Using a strengths-based approach fosters social-emotional and intellectual skills in families as it pertains to parent-child relationships, child development, parenting and leadership. As one parenting educator said, “I recognize that parents come with a rich history, with skills such as resiliency and resolve.” Most parenting educators believe that all parents want what’s best for their children. Another parenting educator shared, “Parents are their child’s first and most important teacher and the one who provides the academic and moral foundation for their children. When we respect parents, we form a trusting relationship with them that leads to a partnership supporting school readiness skills and continual growth and learning.” To support parents in their social emotional development, parenting educators teach parents strategies for managing emotions such as anger and frustration so they can model positive social-emotional skills for their children. A shared guiding philosophy among parenting educators is the importance of reminding parents that they already possess many skills when entering the program. Most often, staff uses praise and encouraging language (positive reinforcement) with parents rather than giving directions (business talk) or commands. Such language models for parents precisely what staff encourage them to do with their children.

(Frameworks: Strengthening Families Protective Factors by the Center for the Study of Social Policy; The National Extension Education Parent Model, 1992.)

5. Social connections

Parents’ social connections with peers foster trusting relationships and a safe and nurturing environment necessary for families to experience new learning, and the sharing of information, resources, and strategies. The First 5 LA external evaluation of the Family Literacy Initiative conducted by the American Institutes for Research (2009) found that parents reported group discussions with the teacher and their peers was most valuable for their learning. Additionally, staff heard from parents that the families participating in their program become like an “extended family.” The program becomes a place where parents can share successes, needs, and challenges, as well as significant family milestones, birthdays, births, vacations, and even grieving a family loss. To increase social connections, staff create a sense of identify and belonging for families through informal and formal ways. Informally, staff may use common nametags or a T-shirt for special events that creates identity. As for creating a sense of belonging for families, staff plans a number of activities or events where teamwork is required; at some sites they do this through planning educational field trips, summer learning activities, or garage sales to raise money for end of year events. These activities encourage families to work together toward a common goal, while strengthening the social cohesiveness of communities as noted in Strengthening Families: A Guidebook for Early Childhood Programs published by the Center for the Study of Social Policy.

To increase social connections that promote healthy and positive relationships among parents of young children, First 5 LA Family Literacy parenting educators provide a number of unique lessons and parenting activities that inspire, influence, and instigate in parents a sense of “awakening” to the joys of parenting, of belonging, and of building strong social ties in support of their family and self. Research demonstrates that it is the quality of social relationships that promote trust, reciprocity, flexibility, and common experiences that protect children from negative outcomes such as child neglect and abuse.

(Frameworks: Strengthening Families Protective Factors by the Center for the Study of Social Policy; The National Extension Education Parent Model, 1992; Head Start Relationship Based Competencies for Staff and Supervisors Who Work With Families.)
6. Child development and home-school connections

Key to the work of First 5 LA family literacy grantees and FLSN is supporting parents to understand the stages of child development, the types of activities they can do at home to promote school readiness, and the home-school connection. For example, understanding the developmental stages and the importance of reasonable expectations, as well as having books in the home and/or learning read aloud strategies, are always popular topics with families served. Data from the First 5 LA 2011-12 parent survey showed that there was a 25% increase in the number of families that had 26-50 or 50+ books in the home. The scores went from 46% at pre-survey to 71% at the post-survey. Often times, parents share that their parents didn’t read to them, so these newly acquired strategies are useful for creating a culture of literacy in their homes. Family literacy parenting educators shared that they work to promote and model life-long learning practices such as problem-solving skills, persistence, resiliency, and a love for learning--skills we know are critical to both a child and parent’s social-emotional and intellectual development. FLSN supports staff in helping parents recognize that everyday opportunities can be used as teachable moments (E.g. folding laundry, grocery shopping, and gardening are great times to promote language, math, and science). According to last year’s parent survey data, families increased the frequency of talking to their children about the letters of the alphabet in books or signs--61% at pre-survey and 81% at post-survey, a 20% increase. Parenting educators are constantly sharing strategies, tools, and resources that parents can use immediately at home, at school and in the community to foster a child’s development and learning. To meet the diverse learning styles of parents, parenting educators must have an understanding of adult learning theory and an arsenal of strategies to deliver instruction that is engaging and relevant to all parent learners. (Frameworks: Strengthening Families Protective Factors by the Center for the Study of Social Policy; The National Extension Education Parent Model, 1992; Head Start Relationship Based Competencies for Staff and Supervisors Who Work With Families.)

7. Family supports

First 5 LA family literacy program staff support families by sharing effective ways they can be resourceful and how to access resources in times of need. On average, First 5 LA-funded family literacy programs have 17 partners in nine different categories that are relied on to provide families with information, services, resources or referrals. As one parenting teacher shared, “I bring resources from community agencies such as the school district to talk about children with special needs, so they have peace of mind.” In some cases, programs create parent peer networks to foster the idea of families helping families. At one site, parents got together to create a monthly swap meet to trade things like children’s clothing, toys, books, etc. (Frameworks: Strengthening Families Protective Factors by the Center for the Study of Social Policy; Head Start Relationship Based Competencies for Staff and Supervisors Who Work With Families.)
8. Leadership and advocacy skills

To get parents ready to engage as full partners in their child's education, staff creates formal and informal opportunities for parents to gain leadership skills and confidence that they can use at home, school, and in the community. At home, parents may lead their family in establishing a schedule that helps with bedtime routines such as reading. At school, parents on the Parent Advisory Board might lead the creation and implementation process of a backpack lending program or the planning of family activities during the summer months. To support parents with advocacy for their families and their community, First 5 LA family literacy parenting educators teach organizational skills, time management, public speaking, and budgeting. Educators also seek out opportunities for their parents to present their thoughts and beliefs on issues of importance to them. Just this year, several parents presented public testimony before the First 5 LA Commission and/or their local school board to advocate for funding support for their family literacy program. Parents are encouraged to voice their interests, opinions, and concerns for their family and their community. Additionally, First 5 LA family literacy programs often find ways to have parents interact with members of their community. For example, FLSN’s partnership with Infinity Auto Insurance encouraged parents to do outreach with their neighbors to promote literacy in the home and share Infinity’s Read Conmigo Program as an available resource. Over 1,000 families were reached through this FLSN parent leadership campaign.

(Framework: Head Start Relationship Based Competencies for Staff and Supervisors Who Work With Families.)

IV. Impact of Parenting Education

As a result of the services offered by First 5 LA-funded family literacy grantees, FLSN’s focus group participants shared the following list of skills that they have observed their strongest family literacy parents have learned in order to support their child’s readiness for school. These skills include the following:

- knowledge of child development stages and milestones
- strategies to support their child’s learning at home
- understanding of the importance of reading and how to make learning fun
- learning about kindergarten standards and school expectations
- familiarity with navigating the school system, how to get involved, and communicating with their child’s teacher
- confidence in and advocating for their child and family at school and in the community

Skills or attitudes acquired by adults to support their role as parent, individual, and community member include:

- Understanding and appreciation of the important role parents play as their child’s first teacher in motivating and preparing children for school and life success.
- Understanding of the impact and influence that people, places, and community have on their child’s growth and development
- A personal “awakening” period that helps parents develop their individual purpose, clarity of role and goals for themselves as an adult.
- A sense of belonging and responsibility to their school and community as demonstrated through increased leadership roles at school and in their faith-based and community groups, particularly when their child’s growth and/or community’s well-being is threatened.

V. Recommendations

Recommendations for implementing a quality parenting education program are:

1. Hire the “right” staff
2. Identify adequate space, time, and resources to meet the needs and interests specified by parents
3. Conduct a parent needs/interest assessment and help parent set reasonable goals
4. Use a strengths-based approach
5. Focus on social connections
6. Inform and educate on child development and home literacy practices
7. Provide on-site family supports and or referrals to help families in times of need
8. Create opportunities for parents to learn and practice leadership and advocacy skills
VI. Conclusion

Parenting refers to the attitudes, values and practices of parents in raising their children. Parenting Education is one strategy within a larger family support system that is designed to support parents to be their child's first and most important teacher, and partner in their child's educational and life success. Parenting education works! It impacts the quality of life of children, families and communities of this generation and generations to come. Going forward, children who are receiving this type of positive parenting are more likely to grow up to be skillful, joyful, confident parents themselves. The challenge now becomes securing more funding for parenting programs that support an increasing number of families who are ready and willing to be full partners in their child's education, and advocates for their family, school, and community.

VII. References


Endnotes