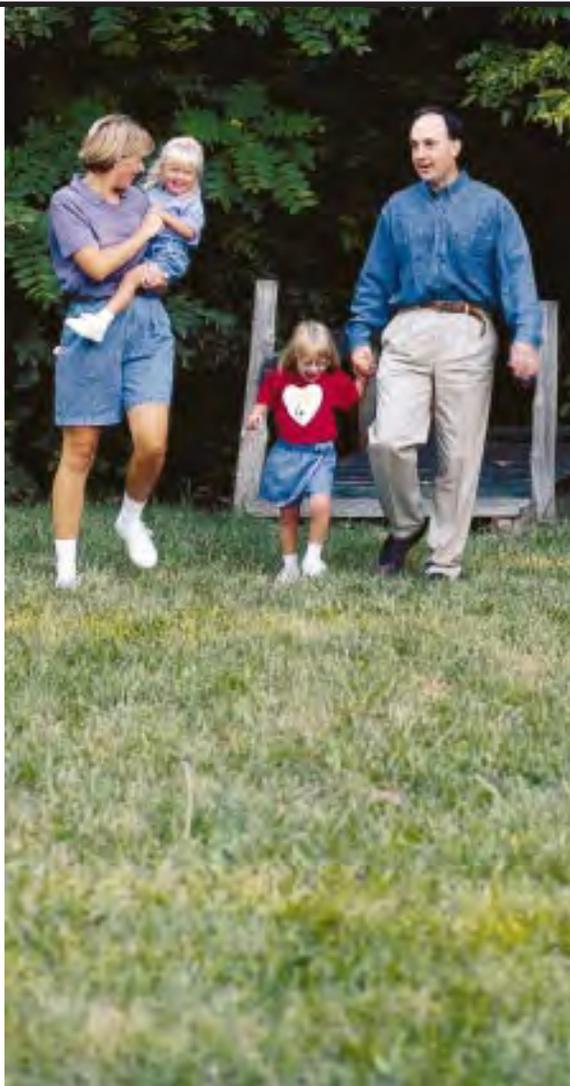




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# *Creating Communities that Care about Parents*

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Kansas State University  
Agricultural Experiment  
Station and Cooperative  
Extension Service

# *Creating Communities that Care about Parents*

## *Challenges facing parents today.*

**Raising a child has never been an easy proposition. But today's pressures create special challenges unique for this generation of parents (Smith et al. 1994).**

### *Being a single parent.*

Increasing divorce rates have created special emotional and economic pressures for single-parent families. Single parents in today's society may be more isolated and perhaps more disillusioned than single parents of the past. Increasing gaps between the "have's" and the "have-not's" in the United States have aggravated the disadvantage of single mothers. Children of single parents are now the poorest age group in the United States.

According to *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and their Families* (1991a), about 25 percent of all children (more than 16 million) lived with only one parent in 1989; twice as many as in 1970. In addition to being poor, single-parent families can often be isolated from extended family and community support.

### *Separation from extended family.*

Mobility often separates parents from important sources of extended family support—the traditional helping network. Parental employment places a great strain on parent-child relationships. For example, parents may have to depend on other caregivers to set limits and provide guidance during their children's formative years.

***Feeling isolated from a sense  
of “community.”***

Between 1970 and 1990, the proportion of mothers who were working or looking for work outside their homes, and who also had children under age six, rose from 32 percent to 58 percent. In 1991, approximately 10.9 million children under six had mothers in the paid labor force (National Commission on Children, 1991a).

Unlike generations prior to the Baby Boom, today’s mothers are likely to be employed further from the home. They are also less likely to have nearby extended family to assume the responsibilities they are unable to handle on their own. About 95 percent of all fathers are employed.

Cultural changes as varied as school consolidation, shopping malls, day care centers and new communications technologies have moved the primary social focus from the immediate neighborhood to the larger community, or even the “global village.” No longer is it automatic that neighbors will know each other—much less watch out for each other and serve as a support system.

One result of this trend is that people without flexible transportation or telephones may become isolated and alone. Robert Putnam (1995) describes a gradual disengagement and loss of connection that weakens the social fabric and increases our sense of isolation.

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***New risks for children.***

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***Their children may abuse drugs  
and deal with peers who are  
substance abusers or pushers.***

**P**arents have to navigate problems which their children face in today’s world.

Although the proportion of adolescents who reported using alcohol within one month decreased from 72 percent in 1980 to 57

***Their children may be in trouble with the law.***

***Their teenage children may become parents before they are ready.***

***Their children may be depressed and at risk of suicide.***

percent in 1990, the rate remains unacceptably high (National Commission on Children, 1991b). According to the 1994 *Monitoring the Future* study, the prevalence of substance use is high among the youth of today and has recently increased (Johnston, L.D., O'Malley, P.M. and Bachman, J.G., 1995). By eighth grade, 58.8% of students have tried alcohol, with 25.9% reporting they have been drunk, 46.1% have tried cigarettes, and 19.9%, 16.7% and 19.9% have tried smokeless tobacco, marijuana and inhalants respectively.

“Between 1977 and 1987, the number of young people held in correctional facilities on any given day jumped 25 percent, from 73,000 to 92,000. Participation in youth gangs is also escalating. Gang membership is closely related to delinquency and violence” (National Commission on Children, 1991b, 227). In 1988, as many as 450,700 children were classified as runaways, and an estimated 127,000 were considered “throwaways,” children abandoned or thrown out of the home.

One million teenage girls become pregnant each year—nearly half of them give birth. The proportion of teenage births by unwed mothers has increased steadily since the early 1970s (National Commission on Children, 1991a). Nationally, the rate of single teen births increased 16 percent between 1985 and 1990 (American Humane Association, 1993). Children of teenage mothers are more likely than other children to perform poorly in school and to exhibit behavioral problems (Luster and Mittelstaedt, 1993). During 1995, there were 3,545 births by unmarried teens in Kansas (Kansas Action for Children, 1997).

An estimated 12 to 15 percent of all children suffer from mental disorders; approx-

***Parents may be at risk of committing child abuse.***

imately 10 percent received treatment in 1990 (National Commission on Children, 1991a). Nearly 500,000 American children lived in hospitals, foster homes and detention facilities in 1989. That number was predicted to climb to more than 840,000 in 1995 (House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, 1989).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the rate at which adolescents committed suicide doubled from 3.6 to 7.2 deaths per 100,000. By 1986, it had increased another 30 percent, to 10.2 deaths per 100,000. After auto accidents, suicide is now the second leading cause of death among adolescents. (National Commission on Children, 1991a).

The United States Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect concluded in its 1990 Executive Summary that child abuse in the United States represented a national emergency. In 1974, 60,000 cases of child abuse and neglect were reported. By the late 1980s this number had increased to 2.4 million per year. During 1995 there were 3,662 child abuse cases reported in Kansas (Kansas Action for Children, 1997).

Reports of abuse and neglect in 1992 represented a 132 percent increase over the last decade (American Humane Association, 1993). This number reflects an increase in child abuse public awareness and the establishment of mandatory reporting laws. The limited availability of prevention services, unfortunately, is also a contributing factor.

“This is especially true in rural counties where inaccessibility and lack of facilities perpetuates the level of isolation experienced by families” (National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research, 1990, 5). Children who have been abused or neglected are 53 percent

more likely to be arrested as juveniles, 38 percent more likely to be arrested as adults, and 38 percent more likely to commit a violent crime (Widom, 1992).

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## ***The importance of informal community support.***

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**No one can raise a child alone—support from family, friends, neighbors, and the kindness of strangers is also needed.**

The pressures of childrearing affect everyone in a family. Fathers and mothers who are struggling with their children cannot depend solely on each other for satisfying support. Under these conditions, parents need a kind word and a helping hand from someone outside the family who understands and cares.

This critical resource of informal support has to be given freely. Few, if any, parents will go out and ask for it; no government or charitable agency can hand it to someone; it cannot be purchased. Parents and nonparents alike have to offer it freely. We have to care about what happens to parents in our community. We have to go beyond the idea and feeling of caring to taking action.

While formal support involves sponsored professional services, informal support involves a network of family, friends and neighbors providing resources to parents to help them deal with childrearing. These resources include emotional reassurance, information, physical assistance, social participation and material aid.

“Social support is imbedded in a network, a set of interconnected relationships among a group of people, that provides enduring patterns of nurturance to enable people to cope with their children on a day-to-day basis” (Garbarino, 1983, 5).

## ***Three reasons for providing support.***

***First—The act of caring is ennobling.***

Experiencing compassion and responding with support to someone facing adversity makes us more human; more humane. This does not make us superior in any way. On the contrary, support given by someone who meets us at eye-level and treats us like a fellow traveler is much more satisfying. The act of caring is an expression of great personal power which uplifts both the giver and receiver.

***Second—Communities that care about parents become more attractive for family living.***

Support for parents has significant implications for community well-being and economic growth. A community that neglects parents and their children will accelerate its own decline.

***Third—Each of us is affected when parents become ineffective in childrearing.***

Our taxes support services to keep children (and future adults) active members of society. Drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and other previously-cited problems carry tremendous public costs. Criminals who break into our homes or assault our loved ones may be products of parents who lost control and authority over their children. The costs of imprisoning someone are also enormous. Providing support for “at risk” isolated parents and their children will not necessarily prevent all of these problems, but it will help.

Effective governmental programs are also needed to provide parents formal support. But, the informal network is the most critical resource. When that support fails—when a parent no longer feels connected to someone who will listen to their story of struggle, gently pat their back with encouragement, and help them think through their problems—more formal resources are less effective. The informal network must be strengthened.

## *The power of the network.*

**The power of the social support network of family, friends and neighbors for someone experiencing distress is clearly documented. In their review of the research on social support and parents, Smith and Kuhn (1996) made the following conclusions.**

***Parents who are isolated are at risk of inflicting child abuse.***

The maladaptive behavior of abusing parents is, in part, the result of the absence of stress- and anxiety-reducing mechanisms provided by strong, supportive social networks. Less support creates more anxiety and leads to fewer adaptive responses to stressful situations. Neglectful mothers tend to be lonely and isolated. Social networks provide parents with emotional support and assistance which improve their disposition and reduce the tendency to use coercive discipline.

***Parents who are poor have fewer resources to cope with pressure.***

Neglectful mothers living in poverty were found to be significantly more isolated from family members and neighbors than those not living in poverty. Impoverished parents are unable to purchase services, such as child care, which would help reduce the stress of childrearing. If they also perceive a lack of social support, feelings of hopelessness may be intensified, which in turn could influence the way poor parents interact with their children. Poor parents who reported few sources of crisis assistance were especially likely to state that they yelled at or slapped their children "very often." Economic deprivation, combined with a lack of social support, creates a dangerous situation for children.

***Parents who feel alone may not feel strong enough to reach out to others.***

Adversity tends to undermine a person's confidence to reach out to others, especially if

***Parents whose problems are likely to be met with criticism can become even more isolated and ineffective.***

***Parents whose problems are severe can become isolated and more ineffective.***

the problem is thought to elicit little sympathy. Feelings of inadequacy can be projected outward, and affected individuals may believe that others have little interest in helping them. They may misinterpret the efforts of others to help. Neglecting and maltreating mothers, although in much greater need of support than most other parents, were likely to avoid potential sources of help, or act in ways that discouraged others from offering help. Those most in need of support often have to depend on others to take the initiative.

Parents who are too emotionally fragmented to be effective with their children may be shunned by the community. For example, parents who appear to be neglectful are likely to be shunned by their neighbors and others in the community. Parents who need the most support may not appear very attractive to potential helpers. These parents may “burn out” the sources of support in the informal network by the intensity of their need and their inability to reciprocate support.

The failure of a community to respond effectively is not limited to families who deviate from acceptable norms of parenting behavior. For example, the longer a child is ill, the less support parents may receive from the informal network of family and friends. This support may be considerable during the early stages of a child’s illness, but potential helpers may eventually become distracted with other demands. They may feel powerless to make a difference, or may not know what to do. Parents of handicapped children often experience social isolation. Their social networks are generally smaller than those of parents without handicapped children.

***Parents who receive support will experience increased self-confidence and feel more capable of dealing with the stress.***

***Parents who receive support will be more effective in childrearing.***

***Parents may perceive support from friends as less stressful than support from relatives.***

Women who reported high levels of social support during prenatal assessment subsequently reported higher levels of self-confidence in the parenting role and less depression three months after delivery. Women who had other people they could rely on for a variety of social resources also had more confidence in their ability to perform well as mothers. This confidence acted as an effective deterrent to depression. Both friendship and community support consistently helped lessen the daily hassles mothers experienced in their relationships with others. Fathers often lack emotional support and frequently feel lonely.

The social support of parents has an indirect positive effect on children. Women with higher quality support had healthier babies and experienced less postpartum depression. Mothers' satisfaction with their personal networks and the size of their maternal networks was related to a warmer and less intrusive style of interaction with their children. The availability of social support for parents is particularly critical when the family is under stress. Irritable infants, growing up in families characterized by low support for their mothers, experienced less responsive mothering. Under these conditions, infants developed insecure attachments.

Family members are more likely to offer instrumental help and some emotional support. However, friends are the main sources of emotional and cognitive support, such as the need for approval, engaging others in discussion and opinion sharing, and seeking advice and information. It's been determined that fathers are more likely to rely on friends, rather than relatives, for emotional support.

## *What you can do.*

***Blame is probably the single most divisive emotion which isolates parents. To blame someone is to set them apart from the group, to make them an outcast.***

Let's assume for a moment that a parent appears to be a legitimate target for blame. A woman abuses drugs during her pregnancy and the child is born with a birth defect. A father sexually abuses his daughter. Both parents are probably aware that others are likely to be critical of their actions.

Set aside the legal issues for a moment. Blame does not allow us to visit the past to stop an act. Blame will not prevent future problems. If we care about children, we have to care about parents. After all, who will have a greater impact on children than their parents? We have truly helped a child if supporting the mother throughout drug treatment helps her become a devoted mother to her child. If we can reach out to support the father, so he receives professional help to enable him to one day redeem his relationship with his daughter, then we have served her best interest. Although the judicial system may have to intervene with a determination of guilt and punishment, we are in no position to make a fair judgement of a parent's actions.

It is in the community's best interest, over the long-term, to preserve the parent-child relationship. Every parent who is emotionally supported and learns to become more capable of raising their children effectively becomes a catalyst for positive change. This change will affect not only their children, but their children's children, and so on from one generation to the next. Every investment in parents has a significant payoff. The family wins. The community wins. Each of us wins because each of us has a stake in the outcome.

***Here are 17 simple things you can do to make your community a friendlier place for parents.***

1. **Step back. Take a look around your community and complete the Parent-Friendly Checklist (see Page 15).**
2. **The next time you see a parent having a problem with a child in a public place, pause for a moment to consider how you might respond effectively. If appropriate, ask the parent what you could do to help. You might say something like, “I know you are pretty stressed right now. Is there something I could do to help you?” Reacting out of concern for the parent also acts as a way of supporting and caring about the child.**
3. **Take a few minutes to visit with a parent, single parent, or parent of a handicapped child in your neighborhood who might be under a lot of stress. Talk about the weather, about sports, about pets—any form of small talk is fine. If the parent wants to talk about his or her child, then follow the parent’s lead in the conversation.**
4. **Complete *Friends InDeed: A Course on Helping* or some other program about helping or improving communication skills. Learning how to respond effectively to someone who is under emotional pressure is a form of psychological CPR, with its own life-saving potential.**
5. **When you see a parent with a baby or toddler in public and have the opportunity to stop and talk, give that parent or child a compliment. For example, (smiling at child) “My what a handsome young man you are. And look at those new sneakers!” This is especially important when the infant or toddler is a child with special needs.**
6. **Offer to baby-sit for a single parent or a stressed young couple in your neighborhood. Buy a couple of movie passes or dinner coupons so they can have an evening out.**
7. **Arrange for babysitting and take a single parent out to dinner.**
8. **If no parent is nearby and you see a child doing something wrong or dangerous, confront the child about the misbehavior or intervene to ensure the child’s safety. Be polite and respond warmly. Remember that you are showing support of the parent by getting involved. Use common sense when considering the wrongdoing, whether the child knows you, and the situation. Do not wait and hope that someone else will respond.**

9. Support workplace initiatives to provide child care for parents. If the business is large enough, on-site child care benefits all employees and company officials. Parents who can bring their children to work have less absenteeism, more company loyalty, and higher morale.
10. Look for opportunities to connect parents in your neighborhood with helpful community resources. There may be a new family storytime at your local library, or a community service that would benefit the parents. Give them handouts you have found.
11. Speak up for parents at community gatherings where they might be unfairly criticized. For example, consider how you might respond to someone who says, "That's the real problem today. Parents don't care anymore."
12. Participate in a community program in which citizens make their homes available to children who are in the neighborhood and may feel endangered by a stranger.
13. Even though you may not be a parent, or your children have grown up, attend a PTO or PTA meeting at your neighborhood school. Listen to parents talk about the problems concerning them. If you are not a parent yourself, learn about the challenges facing parents today.
14. Take a look at your local playgrounds. Are they parent-friendly? Do they have sufficient seating to encourage parents to stay and watch their children while socializing with other parents?
15. Encourage your school board to examine its policies regarding after-school activities and their impact on families. A "school-free" night each week might be helpful to parents. Or, one evening could be set aside to involve parents in a child's activities.
16. Contact the authorities if you have a very good reason to believe that a child is in real danger of child abuse or neglect. Although it might seem to be a contradiction of support for the parent, taking action that brings professional help to a fragmented, stress-overloaded parent may be the most important thing you can do.
17. Visit the Web site for "Creating Communities that Care about Parents." Obtain and distribute the "Caring about Moms and Dads" posters.

***<http://www.ksu.edu/wwparent/community>***

## ***Parent-Friendly Checklist***

### ***Taking stock of your community.***

- Are parents and children visible together in the media?
- Are parent education programs widely available and visibly promoted?
- Are there places children and parents can go to have fun at no cost? For example, do parks have sufficient seating and shade to be inviting to parents?
- Do schools acknowledge the importance of parent-child relationships by setting aside time protected from school activities?
- Do schools schedule fun events that involve parents and their children together?
- Have the schools set up effective conflict-resolution procedures involving parents?
- Are parents consulted in matters of community governance?
- Are businesses in the community parent-friendly?
- If a parent who is alone has an emergency, is there a shelter where that parent could take his or her children for emergency care?

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*<http://www.ksu.edu/wwparent>*

### **“Communities that Care about Parents”**

*<http://www.ksu.edu/wwparent/community>*

This resource is one component in a set of materials designed to strengthen community support for parents. For a current list of resources visit the Web site or write to:

**Communities that Care about Parents  
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