

# Parenting Wisely

## On-the-Job Help for Parents

by Sue Steib



A mother and teen use the Parenting Wisely interactive CD-ROM from their home computer.

FAMILY WORKS



### COMMENDABLE PRACTICE

Randomized or quasi-experimental study, a control or comparison group, posttest or pre- and posttest, follow up, replication.<sup>1</sup>



### CFPSR OUTCOME AREA—CHILD PERMANENCE

- Permanency and stability in children's living situation
- Preservation and continuity of family relationships and connections.<sup>2</sup>

Agnes Barnes is worried about her 11-year-old son Andy.<sup>3</sup> He used to be pleasant and easygoing but has become more distant and sullen. His grades are falling, and several times he has become defiant when she has questioned him about his activities. A lot of teenagers in their neighborhood are involved with drugs and have been in other kinds of trouble. Agnes is becoming increasingly afraid this will happen to Andy, but as a working single mother she has little time or energy, and she doesn't know what else to do anyway.

At times, all parents are unsure how best to respond to their children. Those who also face risks associated with troubled neighborhoods and lack of resources can be especially overwhelmed. Believing that parenting should come naturally, some parents may feel guilty or inadequate and therefore hesitant to reach out for help.

Parenting Wisely is an innovative approach to helping parents, developed by faculty at the Ohio University Department of Psychology, and using technology to address barriers that often keep parents in at-risk families from getting the help they need. Parents may resist attending parenting classes or group sessions because they're embarrassed they need help. Work schedules and lack of transportation can also make interven-

tions hard to access. Even when parent education is available in private sessions with a therapist, parents' fears of being judged can make them defensive and resistant to change.

Distributed by Family Works of Athens, Ohio, Parenting Wisely is offered via an interactive CD-ROM or videotape that parents and children can use in their homes, in a neutral setting such as a library or community center, or in a group session. The entire program takes about three hours but can be viewed in segments. A series of scenarios depicts common problems parents encounter, and several possible ways of responding. Parents select a response, and the program identifies and explains the best alternative. Different segments are designed for individual viewing by either parents or children, and by the family together.

The program comes in different versions for families of younger children, for families of adolescents, for foster parents, and for residential care providers. It is written at a fifth grade level and includes an option to have material read aloud by the computer. A workbook provides practice exercises for the family. Programs also are available in Spanish.

Parenting Wisely's developers drew from research that has demonstrated the effectiveness of video technology in teaching. The parent and child behaviors depicted in the program are based on a review of psychology literature and the developers' experience as family therapists. Computer-based administration eliminates problems related to staff training and consistency of delivery. Less reliance on personnel can also minimize cost and time constraints.

Agencies that have used Parenting Wisely express enthusiastic support for the model. Kay Doughty, director of a Florida Youth Initiative program that used Parenting Wisely, says involving parents was difficult at first, but once they began to use the program, their response was favorable, and word quickly spread, so that engaging other families became easier. Valorie Horn of the



VOICE family strengthening program in Texas has used other parent education models but finds the behavior scenarios depicted in Parenting Wisely to be especially relevant to the needs of the families she sees.

## Evaluation

Parenting Wisely has been tested with a variety of groups in different settings. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Center for Substance Abuse Prevention has designated it as a Model Program (see their website at [www.modelprograms.samhsa.gov](http://www.modelprograms.samhsa.gov)), citing its versatility and effectiveness in preventing the onset or escalation of substance abuse in at-risk youth. In a national review of effective family strengthening programs, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention named the version of Parenting Wisely designed for families of adolescents as a model program.

SSTAR, a community mental health center in Fall River, Massachusetts, tested Parenting Wisely with 153 outpatients in 2001. On average, participants rated the program 4.55 (on a 5-point scale) for ease of understanding, 4.53 for its utility, and 4.31 for the relevance of the problems depicted in the video. Three months after going through the Parenting Wisely program, 48% of participants said they had experienced an increase in parent-child bonding; after six months, that number had grown to 61%. Some parents who were participating in parenting groups at follow-up said their experience with Parenting Wisely had made them more open to such interventions.

Family Plus, an Iowa program designed to strengthen families of middle school students as a means of preventing high-risk adolescent behavior—especially drug use—used the Parenting Wisely video in a group format. Families attended three 2½-hour sessions in which parents and youth viewed and discussed the videos and the youth received counseling and education about substance abuse. Twenty-nine families showed significant improvement on measures of family functioning two to three weeks after completing the program, although the degree of substance use among the adolescents in the sample did not change.

Randomized, control group studies have demonstrated Parenting Wisely's effectiveness with teen parents and families of adolescents in rural Appalachia. A study of 80 parents of Appalachian youth involved with the juvenile court showed that court-mandated participants also benefited significantly, both at the time they completed the program and at follow-up six months later.

Some evidence suggests that even stronger results are possible by adding a group discussion to the program. In a British Columbia study of the families of 61 children being served by a community mental health center, participants were divided into two groups—one consisting of families who used the program individually along with one to four sessions with a

therapist, and another in which it the program was discussed in a group format after participation. For those families who participated in the discussion groups after Parenting Wisely, children's problem behaviors showed a 39% decrease, compared with 25% among those families who used the program individually.

*Sue Steib is a Senior Staff Consultant for CWLA's Research to Practice Initiative (R2P). For more information about Parenting Wisely and the research described in this article, visit [www.parentingwisely.com](http://www.parentingwisely.com) or [www.familyworksinc.com](http://www.familyworksinc.com), or call Family Works toll-free at 866/234-WISE. For full citations of the supporting research described here, see the online version of this article on R2P's website at [www.cwla.org/programs/r2p](http://www.cwla.org/programs/r2p).*

1. Each program highlighted by the Research to Practice Initiative (R2P) is supported by research. For more information on the levels of research, visit the R2P website at [www.cwla.org/programs/r2p](http://www.cwla.org/programs/r2p), or e-mail R2P at [r2p@cwla.org](mailto:r2p@cwla.org).
2. By identifying practices and programs that research has shown to be successful in the outcome areas associated with the federally mandated Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), CWLA's Research to Practice Initiative (R2P) seeks to help states explore the evidence base for improving their programs. For more information, see "Many Efforts, One Voice," *Children's Voice*, January/February 2004, or visit the R2P website, or e-mail [r2p@cwla.org](mailto:r2p@cwla.org).
3. Names have been changed.

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