

## Chapter 4

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# Family Life Education With Court-Mandated Parents and Families

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**M**ost family life education efforts are aimed at adults and use adult education principles. These principles were dubbed “andragogy” by Malcolm Knowles (1984) and include several assumptions: (1) adult learners are self-directed, so they need to know why the topics in educational settings are important; (2) they need to learn experientially; (3) they enter learning with specific problems they want to solve; and (4) they want to be able to apply the learning to their lives immediately (Kearsley, 2010). Those assumptions are challenged in some family life education situations, however. Sometimes family life education participants do not direct their own learning or are not allowed to focus on their self-perceived needs. They may not participate voluntarily but rather are coerced or mandated in some way to participate. In spite of violations of some of the key adult education principles, the other principles are still important guides for educating these adults. This chapter will focus on nonvoluntary participation in family life education.

My experience with mandated family life education programming began when I served as a state specialist for the Cooperative Extension Service. County staff members were asked by local judges to provide leadership for abusive and neglectful parents and other families in high-risk situations. I collaborated with them to design programming that would address the unique situations and needs of nonvoluntary audiences and in evaluating, adjusting, and improving the programs to maximize the success levels for the participants and the educators by using basic family life education principles and guidelines. Some of those

collaborative efforts led to the development of new curricula (see Myers-Walls, Newcom, & Berkope, 2009).

There are many terms that have been used for requiring parents or families to participate in programming related to family life education, including coerced, court-referred, or legally referred (Polcin, 2001); required (Chamberlain, Price, Reid, & Landsverk, 2008); mandated (Brandon, 2006); court-mandated (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996); court-ordered (Schaffner, 1997); and court-connected (Cambron, Yankeelov, & Brown, 2000). Each term has a different legal connotation, but participants are often unaware of those differences (Polcin, 2001), and the educational environment may not differ much across the various situations.

The bottom line for the parents or family members is that someone is forcing them to participate. They are informed that they must attend an educational program in order to achieve or retain a parenting or family role or in order to avoid a fine or some other negative consequence. Because the focus of this volume is family life education, the chapter will not address mandated treatment programs (e.g., mandated drug or mental health treatment or anger management training), although some of the literature in those areas provides important insights for the issue of mandated education. In addition, it will not address family life education for parents and families in incarcerated settings; those participants are mandated to be in the setting but usually not mandated to participate in family life education. (Note that family life education for incarcerated audiences is addressed in Chapter 3.) The chapter will also not address mandates for agencies, systems, or organizations to offer certain education programming to families, and it will not address mandated reporting of abuse and neglect or other dangerous behaviors. The focus is specifically on mandated participation in family life education-related programming.

## **DEFINING THE POPULATION**

The situations that may lead to parents and families being mandated to participate in family life education fall into three categories: (1) parents or families choose to take on a role or set of responsibilities and are required to complete training in order to continue with the legal or regulatory aspects of the new role; (2) parents or families are in a situation that has been judged as putting children or families at risk for negative outcomes, so they are required to participate in educational programming before they can progress legally; or (3) parents or families have been identified as performing inadequately in their family roles and are required to participate in family life education to be allowed to continue in their family roles or possibly to avoid other penalties. The kinds of parents and families who find themselves

in each of those categories are likely to be quite different from each other. Thus, the content and delivery of each type of family life education should also be quite different, so populations representing each category will be defined separately.

- *Mandatory education for a voluntary role.* One situation included in this category is the training of foster and adoptive parents. Individuals who express an interest in adopting or fostering children are required to attend training in order to gain legal caregiver status. In some kinship adoption or foster care processes, the situation may be less voluntary than in other situations, but the individuals in these educational programs are usually self-selected. Although not involved with the courts, other groups may have similarities with this category. For example, families preparing to accept a foreign exchange student or couples in premarital education workshops may share many of the characteristics of this population: They are required by an agency or institution to attend a training session or series because of a new role they will be assuming. Because the programming mandated for these populations could be considered a type of job training, participants are likely to be generally accepting of and open to the programming.

- *Education for risky family situations.* A common example of this type of training is mandated education for divorcing couples. Some jurisdictions have blanket mandates: All couples with children in a particular municipality, county, or state who are filing for a divorce must participate in a program. Other mandates are issued only to divorcing couples with contested custody or visitation cases. In other situations, judges may issue individual mandates to couples who are judged to be at risk for family conflict or repeated court involvement (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). (It may be argued that those with individual mandates would more appropriately fall into the next category.) In most cases, couples need to show proof of attendance in order for the legal procedures to move forward. Another example of training in this category is for families preparing to take a child home after a medical procedure; training is not court-mandated, but a hospital may require family members to participate in specific training before returning the child to the family's care.

- *Mandated education for parents or families judged as inadequate.* Probation departments or judges may require parents who have been found to be abusive and/or neglectful to participate in parenting education programs. Other families in this category are parents who have been involved in domestic violence cases or parents of children in the juvenile justice system. In these cases, parents and families are identified individually as needing targeted education and training. Parents may need to complete the educational program in order to maintain or regain custody of their child(ren) or sometimes the education is an alternative to a fine or incarceration.

## Unique Aspects of Court-Mandated Parents and Families

This section outlines some key characteristics indicative of each category of mandated parents and families. The scope of this chapter does not allow for an exhaustive description of any of the populations. In addition, these descriptions are illustrative only; other groups could fall into these categories as the practice of courts and other authorities choosing to require family life education becomes more common.

## Mandatory Education for a Voluntary Role

In 2008, there were 463,000 children in foster care in the United States, and 123,000 children were adopted (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2009). In 2003, there were 155,355 nonrelative foster homes licensed to care for those children (Van Camp, 2004), but there is a chronic shortage of placements available for children who need such care. Although extensive statistics are available on the *children* in foster care, it is difficult to find information about the foster care *providers*. Some minimal information may be assumed because, although regulations differ by state, it is common for states to require that foster parents be at least 21 years of age. In addition, foster parents must pass criminal and Child Protective Services (CPS) background checks, and they must have a regular source of income (Bigner, 2010). In all but two states, they also must participate in foster parent workshops and basic first aid and CPR training (Chamberlain et al., 2008).

There are three types of foster care, although the distinction is not always identified. “Traditional/regular foster care” is the provision of basic care and support for children on their way to permanent placements, while “treatment foster care” is designed for the needs of behaviorally disturbed children and youth and includes additional training and financial support for the foster parents (Dorsey et al., 2008). Foster parents involved in this type of care are seen as “frontline therapeutic agents” (Dorsey et al., 2008, p. 1404). Although foster care often leads to adoption by the foster parents in other situations, such an outcome is not nearly as likely in treatment foster care. The third category of care is “kinship foster care” and entails family members serving as foster parents. Some of these parents receive no training, while others are treated as fitting into one of the other foster care categories.

Some published evaluations of adoptive parent and foster care trainings may provide hints about some characteristics of this population, but it is not possible to determine how representative the samples are. Puddy and Jackson (2003) reported that the mean age of their group of 62 foster and adoptive parents was 34.7, 63% were female, 83% were married, 77% had less than a college education, and almost one third had no parenting experience. Chamberlain and colleagues (2008)

enrolled 700 foster caregivers (34% kin and 66% nonrelative) in a training program. The participants' mean age at baseline was 48.6 years with a range from 19 to 81. In their sample, 93% were female, 55% were currently employed, 38% had a high school education or less, 49% had some college education, and they had an average of 3.5 other children in the home, with other foster children accounting for the largest part of that number.

Regarding the children in these situations, American Foster Care Resources (Henry, Cossett, Auletta, & Egan, 1991, as cited by Puddy & Jackson, 2003) have estimated that 70% of children in foster care placements have suffered physical abuse and neglect in the past, while about half have been sexually abused. This leads to significant challenges for foster care parents who need to help the children deal with the ramifications of earlier trauma, feelings of rejection and loss, and a sense of personal failure (Puddy & Jackson, 2003). Previous abuse can potentially lead to both internalizing and externalizing behaviors that demand the foster parents use specialized child behavior management techniques (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Van Camp, 2004), whether the setting is considered "regular" or treatment foster care.

What these numbers tell us more than anything is that foster care parents and their situations are diverse. It can be assumed that foster parents are relatively stable—if not, they would not be allowed to participate in the foster care system. As is true in much of the programming related to parenthood, most participants in trainings are likely to be female. However, it is also likely that male caregivers are involved as well in caring for foster children and could be included in training with creative recruitment and programming methods. What we do know about foster care providers is that they have taken extra steps to care for children for whom they were not legally responsible before they entered the system. They could be either valiant heroes who care for children who need help or reluctant kin who agree to step in when a relative did not or could not, but in short, they all have agreed to care for children who have been in difficult situations.

More extensive information is available on adoptive parents than foster parents. According to Jones (2008), between 1973 and 2002 the percentage of all U.S. women who had adopted a child ranged from only 1.3% to 2.2%. Men in 2002 were more than 2.5 times as likely to have adopted a child (3.8%). More than one quarter of women who had not delivered a child and had pursued fertility treatments had adopted a child. Never-married women were less likely to have adopted than married women, but still, 100,000 single women in the United States did adopt in 2002. Adoption is more frequent in families with higher incomes, but a significant number of families under 150% of the poverty level also adopt children. In 1992, it was estimated that 42% of adoptions were by stepparents or other relatives (Kreider, 2003). Some parents move from fostering children to adopting

them; among children adopted out of foster care, 54% are adopted by the former foster parents (U.S. DHHS, 2009).

It can be expected in groups of adoptive parents that many of them have worked long and hard to become parents, many of them have mourned or are mourning their inability to bear children, and some of them have spent significant amounts of money on adoption. Others have both biological and adopted children, and some have accepted responsibility for older children with special needs or a history of maltreatment or neglect, sometimes after serving as foster parents.

### **Education for Parents and Families in Risky Situations**

This category—particularly when it represents programs for divorcing parents—comprises the largest percentage of mandated family life education programming currently. In 2009 an estimated 1,100,401 children under 18 in the U.S. lived with parents who became divorced that year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The largest percentage of those parents (29% of men and 30% of women) were between the ages of 35 and 44, and 64% were classified as White, non-Hispanic. Many of the parents who divorced that year—especially the women—lived under the poverty level: 11% of men and 22% of women.

Many negative outcomes have been identified for children who experience the divorce of their parents (Amato, 2000; Wallerstein, 1991). A factor that seems to be especially important in children's adjustment is their exposure to interparental conflict and aggression (Amato, 1993). While a minority of divorces include high levels of conflict and aggression, it is this aspect of divorce that has been the primary concern of many courts and community agencies, which has led to the rapid growth of mandated family life education for divorcing parents (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). Virtually all divorcing couples do deal with financial strain; the relocation of at least one family member; anger; and perceptions by others and themselves of failure, loss, and defeat. Children can feel caught in the middle of parents who are struggling with those challenges and blaming each other for the problems.

As mentioned before, mandates for these parents to attend educational programs vary across states and municipalities. The approaches that are taken for referring parents to programs will result in very different group compositions. If all divorcing parents are required to attend the programs, there will be a wide range of participants, some of whom are adjusting well and others who are struggling. It is logical to assume that parents who are part of a blanket mandate are not likely to feel singled out, but they still may resent the requirement to attend classes if the divorce is smooth and the relationship between the parents is congenial. In situations where

only parents with contested custody or visitation cases are required to attend or when judges refer only the couples who have a history of conflict and aggression, the resentment may be higher because the parents may rightly take the mandate personally. However, a plus is that participants in this scenario may be more likely to recognize their need for assistance and guidance—at least eventually.

### **Mandated Education for Parents and Families Judged as Inadequate**

Mandates that are applied at this level are individual and based on reports or assessments that indicate that the parents or other family members are performing their role in ways that put the children at risk for negative developmental outcomes. Reports from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (U.S. DHHS, 2010) stated that, in 2008, 2 million reports of child abuse and neglect involving 3.7 million children were investigated by CPS workers across the United States. Almost one quarter (23.7%) of the reports resulted in a finding that at least one child was abused or neglected. An estimated 1,740 children died that year as a result of maltreatment. Children under 1 year of age were the most common victims. In 60% of the cases, the finding was one of neglect. Approximately 80% of the perpetrators were found to be the child's parents and of those, 90% were the biological parents, and slightly more than 75% were under age 40. More than 20% of the children were placed in foster care as a result of the investigation. Reflecting a more preventive approach (albeit tertiary prevention), it has been reported that at least 400,000 parents in the child welfare services system participate in voluntary or mandated parent training each year (U.S. DHHS data cited by Barth et al., 2005).

A number of characteristics have been identified as common among the population of abusive and neglectful parents. Many are overreactive to children's misbehavior, have unrealistic developmental expectations of their children, are socially isolated, have high stress levels, have an external locus of control, (meaning that they feel other people or fate control their behaviors and outcomes) and are likely to depend on physical punishment as a primary method of childrearing (Barton, Baglio, & Braverman, 1994; Bradley & Peters, 1991; Janko, 1994; Shannon, n.d.). Neglectful parents are also likely to experience low levels of self-esteem. Women who have been involved in domestic violence hold many of these same characteristics, and they are very likely to report having been abused themselves as children (Seamans, Rubin, & Stabb, 2007). Parents who sexually abuse children tend to possess different characteristics, but those parents are not likely to be mandated into parenting programs, as their needs are not likely to be met with educational interventions.

When abusive and neglectful parents are required to attend parenting programs, it is logical to expect them to be defensive and angry. Because many abusive parents do not understand the causality of children's behaviors, they may believe that they simply got a "bad child," so they will not grasp the purpose of education. Defensiveness also comes from the fact that they were individually targeted as needing to be "fixed."

Across all three categories of mandated parents and families, some participants may see the requirement to receive family life education as a welcome opportunity to gain answers to difficult family situations. Others may see the requirement as an undeserved intrusion that robs them of basic rights and independence. Yet others may view the training as preparation for a new and demanding role they have chosen, while others may look forward to getting through this necessary hurdle so that they can continue on with the next step, whether that is adopting a child or finalizing a divorce. It is critical for programmers to assess the participants' characteristics and attitudes carefully in order to provide effective programming.

### **Strengths and Assets of Court-Mandated Parents and Families**

It can be challenging to identify the strengths and assets of parents and families who are mandated to participate in family life education; in many cases, families are required to attend the programs based on either identified or likely weaknesses or vulnerabilities, not strengths. A strengths-based approach may be critical in order for the educational intervention to be successful, however (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson, & Hardiman, 2008). In spite of the inherent deficit model, there are some strengths that may be population-wide and predictable. For example, foster and adoptive parents experience screening and need to meet basic criteria, so educators can expect a minimal level of functioning across the population. Many foster and adoptive parents offer to care for children with special needs, difficult histories, and behavior problems, so those participants are likely to reflect high levels of self-efficacy, commitment, and optimism. Strengths in the other groups and in some foster and adoptive parents may be more idiosyncratic, and it may be necessary to become acquainted with individual families to uncover those assets; there is extreme diversity among the groups that are mandated to attend family life education. Making the effort to uncover individual strengths in each participant may take time but will enhance the positive outcomes of the programming.

Common assets identifiable across mandated audiences can provide a springboard for building strengths-based programming. First, all of the groups previously described may be at a turning point in their family lives. They may be taking on responsibility for a new child, losing custody of a child, building a new life after divorce, or experiencing the shock of having been declared abusive or neglectful. These major events or crises disrupt the status quo and may make the individuals

stressed, angry, and/or upset, but these pivotal events also may leave them open to education and information, at least after any resentment and anger have dissipated. Expanding on the Brazelton concept of “touchpoints” (see <http://www.touchpoints.org/approach.html>), families periodically encounter developmental or imposed changes that will not allow interaction patterns to proceed as before. Those families need to develop a new normal, and those situations can be fertile ground for educational interventions.

Another asset of these populations comes from the mandates themselves. If parents and families respond to the mandates by actually enrolling in the course, walking in the agency door, or opening their own door to an educator, there are possibilities. There is no hope of making a difference if there is no contact. Court orders, requirements, or mandates can provide a kick in the pants or a shove down the road. Participants may enter programs angry and resentful, but they move beyond that point quickly when the program proves to be useful, and many then report that it was beneficial that they were required to attend (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008; Van Camp, 2004). Many participants feel positive about the programming once it is underway or complete. Another asset in many mandated programs is that, in order for the program to operate, community linkages among courts, agencies, and educators need to be established. Those networks can lead to strong outcomes for families in need (Shannon, n.d.).

## FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION PRACTICES

### Current State of Family Life Education

The practice of requiring parents and families to participate in family life education programs rarely appeared in literature until the 1980s and 1990s. In recent years, many areas of mandated programming have developed as courts and probation departments attempt to increase the effectiveness and accountability of their programming related to vulnerable children and families. It is interesting to note that the emphasis in most of these mandated programs is the well-being of children. Some of the programs mention family functioning or parent interests, but most of those concerns return to the matter of children being given a safe and nurturing environment. It seems that children’s vulnerability is a critical factor that has allowed governmental and social agencies to justify choosing to mandate family life education.

It should also be noted that most of the programs do not use the term *family life education* and are rooted in a variety of disciplines, such as social work or corrections and are not directly connected to the field of family life education. Many are conducted by court personnel, some by social workers, and some by probation

officials. It is possible to also find programs run by university personnel, medical professionals, and Cooperative Extension staff. Each category of mandated programming has a unique developmental track, so the status of each will be described separately.

### **Adoption and Foster Care Training**

Federal guidelines require foster parents to participate in training programs as part of the licensing process, and that requirement is supported by legislation in all but two states (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Dorsey et al., 2008). Federal guidelines stipulate that foster parents must receive appropriate preparation before beginning their role and then must participate in continuing education each year, although the amount, content, and organization of both the pre-service and in-service training are flexible; there is more focus in the guidelines and legislative directives regarding hours and frequency of training than on its content (Dorsey et al., 2008). Adoptive parents are often included in these trainings, but that is most likely to occur when parents are adopting children who have been in foster care or have been removed from the homes of other caregivers. Reviews have indicated that there is very little consistency in adoptive and foster care parenting programming, and outcome studies have provided weak and inconsistent evidence of the effectiveness of the existing programs (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Dorsey et al., 2008; Puddy & Jackson, 2003).

Two programs are mentioned most often in the literature and are considered the “gold standards” for the field (Dorsey et al., 2008): Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting/Group Selection and Participation of Foster and/or Adoptive Families® (MAPP/GPS) and Foster Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education® (PRIDE). Approximately half of the states require that one or the other of those programs be offered. MAPP/GPS was developed in the mid-1980s and was revised in the early 1990s by the Child Welfare Institute. PRIDE was developed with the idea of filling in the gaps left by MAPP in 1993 and was revised 10 years later by the Child Welfare League of America (Dorsey et al., 2008). In spite of their widespread use, there is very weak evidence available to demonstrate their impact. For the preparation of parents providing treatment foster care, Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC) was created by Chamberlain and colleagues in the mid- to late 1990s (see Chamberlain, 1998; Chamberlain & Mihalic, 1998) and seems to be the only training program for this population. Its use appears to be increasing.

The content of all three curricula includes dealing with new and unexpected changes, managing children’s challenging behaviors, and dealing with the child-serving system (Dorsey et al., 2008). Beyond that basic core, MAPP focuses on

the impact of foster care on foster parents and families, while PRIDE concentrates more on the importance of meeting the needs of children. MTFC, on the other hand, focuses more on teaching the specific techniques and approaches of treatment foster care. The relative lack of training for dealing with difficult child behaviors is consistent with some of the concerns expressed by other authors who have voiced a need for training that provides skills-based education for dealing with behaviorally challenging children (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Van Camp, 2004).

Participants in training sessions for adoptive and foster parents generally report feeling positive about the training, suggesting that there is little or none of the anger and resentment that has been attributed to participants in other mandated trainings. In spite of their positive feelings, however, there is limited evidence that the trainings have built requisite skills and knowledge. Puddy and Jackson (2003) concluded that MAPP serves as a better preservice tool to help families decide whether to enter the foster care role than as a tool that teaches the skills necessary to the role. Overall, it appears that mandating training for foster and adoptive parents is a successful strategy for helping participants to make decisions about beginning the role, but more guidance and care is needed in determining the content and focus of the training, especially in preparing foster parents for dealing with children who bring significant challenges to the relationship.

### **Education for Divorcing Parents**

One of the first mandatory divorce education programs in the United States was offered in Kansas in 1976 (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). Almost 20 years later, a 1994 survey of over 3,000 counties in the United States found that almost one quarter of the responding counties offered court-connected group parenting education programs with a primarily educational purpose (Blaisure & Geasler, 1996). Just 4 years later, the percentage had increased to 48%—a 180% increase (Geasler & Blaisure, 1999). In 2008, Pollet and Lombreglia reported that mandated programs were in operation in 46 states. Some authors have referred to this growth as “the latest trend for family courts” (Salem, Schepard, & Schlissel, 1996, p. 9). One survey found that 65% of divorcing parent programs are comprised of mandated attendees (Cambron et al., 2000). In most cases, mandated parents need to complete the class before a divorce hearing will be scheduled or a final decree issued.

In the early 1990s, an attempt was made to distribute books on parenting after divorce to parents and measure the impact (Ogles, Lambert, & Craig, 1991). The results showed that the use of any of the books was associated with improved emotional outcomes for the parents, but no parenting skill measures were used. Formal divorce education programs began after that time. Programs vary from single, 2-hour sessions to a series lasting for 15 sessions, with most consisting of either

2 or 4 hours (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). Geasler and Blaisure (1999) reported that programs in the late 1990s concentrated on reducing children's exposure to interparental conflict (64%), improving parenting skills (55%), and decreasing the number of legal complaints (32%). There are several face-to-face curricula that have been discussed in the literature. *Children in the Middle* is a video-based program created in the early 1990s; it is billed as a coparenting program focused on raising children in two homes (Craig, 1998). Twelve years after the classes began, an online version of *Children in the Middle* was offered. *Helping Children Succeed after Divorce: A Court-Mandated Program for Divorcing Parents* (Petersen & Steinman, 1994) began in the mid-1990s and focuses on providing parents with specific, concrete actions to reduce conflict and support children's positive development. *Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-Parenting* (Mulroy, Sabatelli, Malley, & Waldron, 1995) is a 6-hour program created by Cooperative Extension professionals and other faculty at the University of Connecticut and is aimed at helping parents negotiate the changes of divorce. The Cooperative Parenting and Divorce program (Boyan & Termini, 1999; Cooperative Parenting Institute, 2009) is an 8-session, 16- to 20-hour program with video/DVD and leaders guide and bills itself as the "first and only comprehensive parenting coordination training program" (Cooperative Parenting Institute, 2009). It offers training programs, leader preparation, and written materials. All of the programs that were previously described focus on lowering parental conflict and improving child outcomes. The programs vary in length, the amount of focus on knowledge transmission versus skill-building, and the specific programming materials and components.

The majority of the divorce education programs conducting any sort of evaluation have relied heavily on customer satisfaction surveys. In those surveys, parents indicated that they learned something new and that they appreciated the program (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Brandon, 2006; Whitehurst, O'Keefe, & Wilson, 2008). Those studies have found that parents say the program is helpful and that they would recommend it to others. When programmers measure outcome data, those data are often also based on self-report. Some examples of how parents say they have changed their behavior include not sending messages to the other parent through the children and not fighting or arguing in front of the children (Brandon, 2006), saying they have a more positive relationship with the other parent (Whitehurst et al., 2008), or adjusting to the divorce better after the program (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008).

A few programs have used experimental designs with comparison groups. For example, Whitehurst and colleagues (2008) found that parents who participated in Cooperative Parenting and Divorce rated their relationships more positively, improved their coparenting abilities more, and more successfully lowered their maladaptive behaviors compared to a delayed-treatment group. Pollet and

Lombreglia (2008) have called for more research to begin to assess the impact of the programs in light of the timing of the program, the content and teaching strategies used, the amount of conflict found in the couple, and the length of program.

### **Mandated Training for Abusive/Neglectful Parents**

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) (2010), over 3 million children received “preventive services” in 2008. These are “services ... provided to parents whose children are at-risk of abuse or neglect” (p. 77). The services usually focus on teaching developmental stages and improving childrearing competencies. According to one review, at least 400,000 parents each year participate in either voluntary or mandatory educational parenting programs, and placing parents in such classes is reported to be the primary approach used by Child Welfare Services (Barth et al., 2005). There are many parenting education programs offered across the country; Carter and Kahn (1996) estimated several years ago that there were then over 50,000 programs reaching millions of parents and caregivers every day. Some of these programs are associated with child welfare programs and others are not, but many of the programs aim to prevent or reduce child maltreatment. There is very little information about the number of programs that include mandatory participation, however. When mandated parents are integrated into mainstream parenting programs, it is very difficult if not impossible to describe the mandated programming in any distinct way. It is known, however, that parent training is a common aspect of court orders involving parents. It is often required that parents complete the training in order for the case to be dismissed (Barth et al., 2005).

The ultimate objective of parent training programs run by child welfare agencies is to preserve or reunite families (Barth et al., 2005). In some cases, the approach of the programs used with mandated parent audiences is to teach the parents techniques for managing or altering children’s inappropriate behavior and thereby attempting to reduce the likelihood that the child will experience more negative outcomes (Incredible Years, 2009; McMahon, 2006). Other programs assist parents in understanding and negotiating with the child welfare system (Barth et al., 2005). Many other programs used with mandated parents are aimed at general improvement of parenting skills, such as providing real limits in a fun way (Love and Logic Institute, 2011); preventing and treating child abuse and neglect (Nurturing Parenting [Family Development Resources, 2007]); using effective communication techniques, encouragement, and natural and logical consequences (STEP Publishers, n.d.); reducing or eliminating instances of child maltreatment by increasing positive parenting practices (Myers-Walls et al., 2009); reducing problem behaviors and increasing communication and family unity

(Parenting Wisely [Family Works, 2003]); or teaching children and their parents the skills necessary to get along without abuse and neglect (Project 12-Ways [Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2003]). In a number of situations, parenting programs may include both mandated and nonmandated parents, even though some authors have argued that such integration is likely to compromise the effectiveness of the programs (Barth et al., 2005; Myers-Walls et al., 2009).

Barth and colleagues (2005) have outlined four primary components of programs for parents in the child welfare system: (1) assessing parent problems, (2) teaching parenting skills, (3) parents applying the skills to their children, and (4) parents receiving feedback about how the new skills are working. These components reflect the child welfare roots of much of the programming with high-risk parents; in contrast, individual assessment and monitoring are not normally part of the family life education process. In their description of “The Universe of Parenting Education: A Typology,” Carter and Kahn (1996) included a category called “multiple and complex needs” (p. 12). In that category are topics such as abuse/neglect, antiviolenace, and CPS. (Note that divorce and separation, foster care, and adoption—the other target topics covered in this chapter—are also included in this category.) Carter and Kahn stated that programming in this category will involve intensive levels of service, specialized training, higher levels of supervision, and collaboration with agencies and services. This is in contrast to another of the Carter and Kahn categories—normative parenting education programs, which are primarily promotional in design, lowest in intensity, and most prevalent among middle-class communities. It is important for each program leader to consider his or her role and clarify when it moves from normative parenting education to more intense involvement and when it is family life education versus case management (Myers-Walls, Ballard, Darling, & Myers-Bowman, 2011).

Very few programs have been designed specifically for abusive and neglectful parents. For example, many mandated parents participate in Parenting with Love and Logic (Love and Logic Institute, 2011), Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP Publishers, n.d.), or Parenting Wisely (Family Works, 2003)—programs that were either developed for “normative parenting” or are used for both mandated and voluntary participants. One set of programs that have attempted to meet the unique needs of abusive/neglectful parents is the Nurturing Parenting Programs (Family Development Resources, 2007). In these programs, Steven Bavolek has maintained a specific goal of preventing or reducing child abuse. Reports indicate that these programs have been used with a wide variety of parents, including mandated audiences, although none of the programs is advertised as being designed specifically for that group, and no evaluations of the Nurturing Parenting Programs when used with mandated audiences could be found. Parenting

12-Ways (Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2003) is marketed as a parenting and therapy program, and *The Incredible Years* was designed for parents with children with serious behavior problems, although it is unclear whether those programs have addressed the issue of mandated audiences (*Incredible Years*, 2009).

In the late 1990s, I encountered difficulties in finding appropriate programs when working with a county extension educator who had been asked by the courts to provide mandated programming for abusive/neglectful parents. After much frustration, the creation of the program *Parenting Piece by Piece*, now in its 4th edition, resulted (Myers-Walls et al., 2009). An evaluation of *Parenting Piece by Piece*, when used with mandated audiences, found several changes from pre- to post-assessment. After the program, participants reported they were more confident as parents, used more positive parenting techniques, spanked their children less, and were more likely to take care of their own needs (Myers-Walls et al., 2009). This evaluation was based on self-report, albeit using a comparison of reports of actual behavior frequency in the recent past at the beginning and end of the program.

Other programs are much less structured and may not use identifiable curricula. Schaffner (1997) reported on a mandated program for parents with teens in the juvenile justice system. The program was offered in a local county probation department by a probation officer using guest speakers and videos. Informal, ad hoc programs like this may be quite common, but it is difficult to estimate how common in the absence of nationwide data. What is clear is that there are very few programs designed specifically for this audience.

A related set of parenting education programs is mandated for parents who have been involved in domestic violence. One such program is *Men Engaged in Nurturing Strategies (MENS)* out of *SAFEchild* (United Way of the Greater Triangle, n.d.) in North Carolina. Another is the *Family Violence Accountability Program* (Insight Counseling, n.d.) in Michigan. Parenting education is mandated for those parents based on research that identifies the children in those families as being at risk for violence and maltreatment. No outcome evaluation reports could be found from these programs.

## **General Needs of This Population and Rationale for Family Life Education**

As mandated audiences, all participants must first come to terms with the fact that they are required to participate. The reaction to the mandate could range from gratitude and relief to resignation, anger, and hostility. The participants most likely to react with anger and hostility may be those who have been judged as being inadequate and who have lost rights and privileges until they have met the expectations of the authorities. However, the interpretation of the mandates may

be very individual. All of the populations that have been mandated to attend parent and family life education programs have been judged to have a lack of information and skills related to parenting and family relationships, so education is determined to be something they need. Unfortunately, few needs assessments have informed these judgments.

Programs for adoptive and foster parents define the needs of the audience in part by the legislation that governs the foster care and adoption systems. Foster parents need to know the regulations and expectations that they will face. Some authors have also pointed out that this population needs additional assistance with responses and techniques for dealing with difficult child behaviors, because 70% of children in foster care are estimated to have those characteristics (Van Camp, 2004). These parents are also likely to deal with the legal system related to the various complications that led the child to be placed in their care. Evaluations of foster care training programs show that the issue of child behavior management is the area in which foster parents feel least well prepared (Puddy & Jackson, 2003; Van Camp, 2004).

Divorcing parents are in need of understanding the impact of divorce on children, strategies to avoid putting their children in the middle of parental conflicts, and methods for establishing appropriate communication strategies and reducing hostility with the child's other parent (Brandon, 2006; Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). These parents also may need information about the legal system and how they will be interacting with it, although that aspect of programming has not been shown to be the most impactful. It is important to keep in mind that many of the parents in these programs are likely to be dealing with significant life changes that could contribute to high stress levels, so it may be important to build stress-reduction techniques into the program.

For parents mandated to attend parenting programs due to abuse and neglect, it is important to remember that needs will vary by the type of abuse and neglect, the numbers and ages of children, whether the child has been removed from the home or not, and the unique characteristics of the individual parents (Barth et al., 2005). Leaders should investigate whether the participants are literate or not, whether they will need child care during the program, and whether they have previously participated in parenting programs. In a paper on the National Parenting Education Network website that reviews best practices for programs aimed at preventing child abuse, Shannon (n.d.) has stated that these parents need increased knowledge about children and parenting, a chance to practice using the information and skills they have learned, techniques for managing their children without abusing them, stress management strategies, and suggestions on improving their relationships with others so they can reduce their isolation.

## Marketing/Recruitment

When participants are mandated to attend programs, recruitment and marketing take a very different turn than when programs are trying to attract participants. Although not all mandated individuals will participate, mandating people to attend is one of the most effective means for getting them through the door. The real marketing task may be in establishing support and cooperation from the agency or jurisdiction that will issue the mandates, orders, or referrals.

Cookston, Sandler, Braver, and Genalo (2007) looked at the readiness of court systems to adopt evidence-based programming. They looked specifically at family courts establishing mandated divorce education, believing that the courts were an especially appropriate home for the educational programs. They based their argument on the facts that the mandates would be issued by judges, and the courts have shown an increasing interest. After surveying 128 courts, they discovered that the most important factors indicating readiness to adopt evidence-based programs were (1) the presence of champions advocating for the programs (and the absence of opponents), (2) community attitudes that were supportive of expanding the court's programming, and (3) being in a smaller county. The authors speculated that one of the reasons for greater support coming from smaller counties was the fact that larger counties may have had the resources to create their own programming and therefore were less likely to seek evidence-based programs from other sources. The authors also cited previous work that showed that judges and advocacy groups would supply very strong support for effective parenting programs and very few would oppose them, while almost one quarter of state legislators might oppose such programs.

Cambron and colleagues (2000) suggested a list of questions to answer when considering the possibility of establishing a court-connected divorce education program. The list should be viewed with caution, because the basis of the items is unclear, but the questions could provide a starting point and an organizing structure when combined with other literature. The questions are paraphrased here:

1. What are the goals of the program?
2. What are the needs of the target population?
3. What components should be part of the program? Does a curriculum exist or need to be created? How much does it cost?
4. What support is available for the program from judges, community leaders, the clerk's office, and agencies?
5. Who will manage the program and serve as facilitators?

6. What funds are available? Will there be fees for participants? If so, what will happen if fees are not paid?
7. What will qualify people to be mandated? What will they be told? When could they be exempted? How will attendance be documented? What happens to dropouts?
8. How will the program handle participants with special needs and language differences? Will security personnel be necessary?
9. How will the program be evaluated and for whom? What kinds of outcomes will be measured? Who will conduct the evaluation? How will evaluation costs be covered?

Although the Cookston and colleagues study (2007) and the list of questions from Cambron and her collaborators (2000) looked only at divorcing parent education, the results are likely to have implications for all mandated family life education. It appears to be critical to identify champions and build coalitions of supporters—both at the local level and with legislators. Mandated programming is multifaceted and requires attention to the contributions and roles of families, mandating officials, service providers, legislators, and funding sources. It also is necessary to identify effective programs, which means conducting more and stronger evaluation studies that look not only at “customer satisfaction” and self-report reactions but that also assess behavior change and the impact of the programming on families and communities. It also may be helpful to educate policy makers and program leaders to recognize quality programs and materials, possibly using a tool like the Family Life Education Materials Quality Assessment Tool (Myers-Walls, 2010).

### **Barriers to Participation**

In spite of being mandated, not all participants attend programs, participate in activities, or continue attending after they start. Leaders' responses to attendance behaviors vary. In some foster parent programs, staff will follow up with absent participants and compensate for missed sessions in another visit (Chamberlain et al., 2008). This may reflect the power balance in foster parent training. Because the foster care system needs more willing parents, staff often experience negative consequences if participants do not complete the program, so they take extra steps to help participants complete the training. In less accommodating settings, researchers have found that parents who did not comply with mandated parenting programming had lower incomes, were single or separated, were more likely to have an aggressive male in the household and a transient lifestyle, and they had higher drug and alcohol use levels, more partner violence, and a higher incidence

of criminal behavior (Butler, Radia, & Magnatta, 1994). This suggests that leaders need to be sensitive to those participants facing significant life obstacles and try to lower those obstacles in order to encourage better attendance.

When officials require attendance at these programs, they are assuming that it will be helpful for individuals to attend. To explore whether attendance influences program outcomes, Nix, Bierman, and McMahon (2009) collected data on participants in a Parent Management Training program called Fast Track (not mandatory). They measured attendance and quality of participation in two different components of the program as well as completion of take-home activities. They discovered that *quality* of participation was more powerful than the frequency of attendance in predicting successful program outcomes. In the end, however, demographic characteristics, severity of children's problems, and stressful family situations predicted success better than attendance and participation in the Fast Track program. The Fast Track program instituted several conditions to encourage and support attendance, however. Applying this research to mandated audiences suggests that it is not enough to just get the participants to show up, but that engaging them actively in the educational environment is critical.

Van Camp (2004) explored attendance issues with a sample of participants in the MAPP program for biological, adoptive, and foster parents. She noted that 36% of participants dropped out of the program before the end. About one half of the foster parents, just under half of the biological parents, and a few of the adoptive parents were mandated or received incentives (babysitting reimbursement or \$45 payment) for attending the sessions. The adoptive parents had the highest rates of attendance, while the biological parents attended least often. Mandating participation clearly increased attendance; combining the mandate with reimbursement for babysitting costs was most effective with encouraging and maintaining attendance. It is interesting that paying participants to attend (without other incentives) was only moderately effective.

Research with a related population offers insights into the impact of mandating attendance. Polcin (2001) looked at the impact of coercing people abusing drugs into drug treatment versus allowing them to enter voluntarily. Most studies have found that positive outcomes were not increased or decreased based on whether participation was mandated; apparently, being mandated to attend drug treatment does not either cancel out or guarantee results. The authors concluded that coercion is a continuous and not a dichotomous variable. Many participants in drug treatment receive pressure from family, friends, self, and professionals to enter treatment, so coercion can come from many sources, and users may not perceive coercion when others feel it is present. The author cited a study that found that 35% of mandated drug treatment participants reported that they did not feel coerced. This suggests that the perceptions of the parents and families in court-mandated

family life education are at least as important as objective measures of mandates or requirements. The more a facilitator can help a participant see attendance as his or her idea, the greater the commitment and the lower the resistance.

This background suggests that mandating attendance in family life education programs is likely to increase attendance but that attendance alone will not guarantee active participation or positive impact of programs. Some participants want to passively “do their time” and move on. Schaffner (1997) talked about parents who “entered the court-ordered classes obviously very angry and sat defiantly silent with their arms across their chests” (p. 328). Yet several studies found that participants may enter a program angry and resentful after being required to attend but later support the mandate and say they wish it had started earlier or lasted longer (Brandon, 2006; Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). So mandates seem to increase attendance, but it is up to the atmosphere of the group to encourage participation and true engagement in the educational environment.

### **Environmental Considerations**

Cookston and colleagues (2007) pointed out that divorce education programs could be offered in schools, universities, community service agencies, and family courts. Salem and colleagues (1996) stated that leaders of those programs could be “judges, lawyers, college professors, community volunteers, researchers, mental health professionals, graduate students, family court mediators, and parents” (p. 16). Some argue that the court setting is really the best setting (Cookston et al., 2007), but others make different arguments. Myers-Walls and colleagues (2009) and Salem and colleagues (1996) suggested that it is important for program leaders to separate themselves from the mandating bodies and officials. If parents and families are angry and resentful, it could be helpful for the program to be in a different setting besides the mandating organization so that participants can resolve those negative feelings more quickly. Such a setting can help participants engage more honestly and openly in discussions and activities, facilitating the effectiveness of the program. On the other hand, holding programs in the official agency setting can enable the mandating authorities to monitor attendance, and participants may take the mandate more seriously. They could be more motivated to demonstrate improvement to those who have determined that they need to attend programming.

A very important environmental consideration is the distribution of power in the program leader–participant relationship. Mandated participants begin the relationship several steps down. Some authors have noted that there are often large numbers of minorities in participant populations while the majority of program leaders are white and middle-class (Schaffner, 1997; Van Camp, 2004). If leaders are also presented as experts with all the answers, it is not surprising that

participants feel resentful and angry. Using good family life education programming principles, leaders should create environments that are comfortable, safe, and free of unnecessary distractions. Setting up an environment of punishment will not facilitate learning and success in program outcomes.

Another environmental consideration is the makeup on the target audience for the programs. There is controversy regarding whether groups should consist of only mandated participants or a mixture of mandated and voluntary. Barth and his coauthors (2005) commented on one type of group heterogeneity when they stated that “combining open and closed in-home cases in parenting groups generates substantial heterogeneity with regard to motivation and issues of expectations” (p. 358). Parenting Piece by Piece (Myers-Walls et al., 2009) has taken the position that mandated parenting programs should be made up of only mandated parents, perhaps supplemented with some additional high-risk referrals. This recommendation is based on several issues. First, it is important for programs to address the anger and resentment related to the mandate, and it would be difficult to do so if the group were mixed. Second, the educational needs of high-risk and low-risk groups are quite different, and it is difficult to meet both sets of needs simultaneously. A third issue is the stigma that may accompany mandates. If only some of the participants are mandated to attend, they may feel nervous and self-conscious about being discovered and may resist participation. If the entire group is mandated, this fear does not arise. Experience indicates that mixed groups may also have negative outcomes related to who constitutes the larger part of the group. If most of the group is not mandated and a few are, it is likely that the mandated parents will feel intimidated by the other parents and will sit back and participate only enough to get credit for attending. Because they are only passive participants, program topics and solutions are not likely to meet their needs. If the mandated parents form the majority of the group, the voluntary participants may wonder what kind of group they have found themselves in and quickly drop out, or they may take on a quasi-leader position and try to “save” the high-risk parents.

Others have taken a different approach to this issue and advocated for mainstreaming at-risk parents and families with other groups. They believe that this mixture provides good role models for the struggling parents and helps them transition into other community programming. The underlying belief is that both groups can be served with programming that falls under the Carter and Kahn (1996) category of normative parenting and that parenting and family needs are standard and predictable. This means that basic curricula will meet the needs of all parents and families. With these arguments in mind, group leaders should consider whether to restrict membership to either mandated or nonmandated or mix the two. Whatever a program leader decides, the fact remains that it is critical for any leader to become familiar with the audience and tailor programs to their needs.

### **Modes of Learning**

Because of the issues of control in mandated programming, it could be easy for a leader to slip into a mode of didactic learning with specific content and inflexible curriculum outlines. This is especially true if particular curricula are required as the only acceptable guides. Top-down programming can also result if there is no established curriculum and the leaders conduct sessions on an ad hoc basis. But several authors have noted the importance of including active learning approaches and collaborative agendas (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008; Puddy & Jackson, 2003). Those authors and Shannon (n.d.) also have used evaluation results to determine that more active learning styles that address and provide opportunities to practice specific skills are likely to be most effective.

As with any family life education programming, it is critical to know the audience and how they learn. Some programs have used booklets and other written materials as the primary educational strategies and have found them to be effective in divorce education (e.g., Ogles et al., 1991). Some participants in high-risk situations may be functionally illiterate, however, making the use of written materials ineffective. Other approaches have been the use of electronic media and web-based materials (Cooperative Parenting Institute, 2009; Craig, 1998; Pacifici, Delaney, White, Nelson, & Cummings, 2006). The advantages of these varied delivery methods are their flexibility regarding timing and location. Flexibility can be especially important to some families who are anxious to have children returned to the home, to get on with the divorce proceedings, or complete the adoption process. The disadvantage of distance-learning options is the reduced opportunity to discuss issues with others and normalize reactions and behaviors as well as the possible lack of a viable computer among participants. There are also possibilities in group programs to set up supportive networks, and participants can model the behaviors of others who have successfully dealt with the resentment of being required to attend (Polcin, 2001) or who have found useful approaches for dealing with family challenges. The distance-learning setting also makes it much more difficult to monitor the needs, understanding, and participation of parents and families.

### **Educator Characteristics**

As stated earlier, many different types of professionals have been involved in leading mandated family life education programs for parents and families (Cookston et al., 2007; Salem et al., 1996). Myers-Walls and her coauthors (2009) recommended that leaders of Parenting Piece by Piece have experience with parenting education and/or experience with working with mandated audiences. In addition, they state that ideally leaders will have “a degree and work experience in child development, family studies, family life education, social work, counseling, or a related field” (p. 2) but that a degree is not necessary. Salem and his colleagues (1996) noted some

authors have said that a mental health background is most important for divorce education leaders, and some programs require at least a master's degree in a mental health field. What Salem and his coauthors emphasized, however, is having skills in group work. They express concern about putting too much emphasis on academic background. As they stated, "In addition to a substantive knowledge base, programs selecting presenters should strongly consider background in adult education theory, group facilitation skills, and public speaking" (1996, p. 16). Bundy-Fazioli and colleagues (2008) conducted a qualitative study with child welfare workers and mandated parents and found three key worker characteristics that were valued by the parents: (1) a positive disposition, (2) compassion, and (3) authenticity.

Carter and Kahn (1996) stated in their analysis of parenting education that "to those individuals considered national leaders, parenting educators . . . are considered to be inadequately prepared for the responsibility they carry" (p. 45). Since that time, the requisite skills for parenting education programming in general have been captured by the National Extension Parenting Educators Framework (NEPEF) (DeBord et al., 2002). In this model, professionals are expected to *GROW* in the field by participating in professional development and socialization; *FRAME* the content by learning to understand and apply the primary theoretical frameworks and philosophies of parenting education; *DEVELOP* programs using needs assessments, behavioral objectives, creative activities and program components, and appropriate evaluation plans; learn how to deliver the program effectively and *EDUCATE* parents and families using proven teaching and learning strategies; *EMBRACE* a variety of parent and family backgrounds, forms, and cultures; and *BUILD* the field of parenting education by advocating for the needs of parents and families at community, regional, national, and international levels. These skills were identified for parenting educators in a variety of settings, and they define abilities that are critical for leaders of mandated programs as well.

As previously stated, mandated parent and family programs have spanned a number of professional settings and disciplines. The professionals from these settings have very different areas of expertise. The danger in multidisciplinary situations is that one discipline may not recognize, understand, or take advantage of the expertise of another. For example, Salem and colleagues (1996) wrote an article titled "Parent Education as a Distinct Field of Practice." The authors seemed to be totally unaware of the fact that parenting education has a long history and well-established theoretical, research, and practice base separate from the court-connected context of the article. Further, the authors considered only divorce education programs in the manuscript, ignoring other emphases in parenting education programs both inside and outside of the court context. As Carter and Kahn (1996) put it, "Parenting education is a cross-disciplinary exercise that still needs to establish a common language and conceptual framework that can be embraced by each of those disciplines" (p. 100).

As previously mentioned, the professional skills outlined in NEPEF could apply to all of the mandated programming that involves parents. However, it may be important to embellish the NEPEF skills when used in mandated settings. For example, perhaps the GROW component needs to be expanded to include training in the legal system. The ideal situation in this multidisciplinary setting would be for the various professionals involved in these programs to work closely together, recognizing and honoring the unique expertise held by each discipline. Child development and parenting experts should provide background in children's developmental needs and parent-child relationships, while lawyers and court officials should provide their insights into legal precedent and reasonable use of power. When collaborating, professionals need to know and claim what they know and also know what they don't know. The complex situations of children and families at risk are much better faced by a united, multidisciplinary force than by isolated groups of practitioners, researchers, or advocates.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethical considerations associated with programming for mandated audiences are closely entwined with appropriate use of power. The fact that someone can make someone else do something means that there is an unequal power distribution. Program leaders in this situation may be tempted to focus on the negative assessments of the participants and pronounce judgments, telling participants what to do rather than working together to build skills and find solutions. As Schaffner (1997) reported, she observed leaders saying things such as the following:

You have got to get control of your kid!... Discipline is important—or you are going to have a child runnin' the streets! and *Kids do not survive divorces!* Divorces are not “okay”! When a father leaves a family, a *kid* feels abandoned, too. (pp. 422–423)

While statements like these could be shared among peers in informal conversations, their negative and defeatist tone can have unintended consequences when expressed by program leaders.

It is critical for program leaders to examine their own attitudes and opinions when delivering these programs. Knowing themselves and their biases will help the leaders to avoid allowing those attitudes to impinge inappropriately on participants. Schaffner (1997) identified three perspectives in her unstructured observations of a probation-operated parenting series for parents with children in the juvenile justice, divorce court, or CPS systems. The first perspective, held by most

of the probation department representatives, was that the probation department could “parent” better than the biological parents who were deviant or delinquent. The second perspective was a defensive reaction to the first: Although the parents recognized they didn’t have the answers to their problems, they did not feel they were getting answers from the probation department either. The third perspective was sometimes held by both parents and probation personnel. This perspective was a kind of demonization of the children (primarily older children), blaming the children for being bad or uncooperative. None of these perspectives is helpful and can be considered unethical if held by professionals. Professionals who are respectful of and collaborative with the participants are more likely to achieve positive outcomes.

Another ethical pitfall to avoid is conflict of interest. This can occur if professionals hold more than one position in relation to the families in the programs. Schaffner (1997) found that probation officers would recommend that parents testify against their children in court proceedings—an approach that is helpful from the perspective of probation department goals but not from parenting education perspectives. Salem and colleagues (1996) warned about the dangers of leading programs that include parents who have or could be clients in the law practice responsible for the program. This concern also argues against having staff from the probation, court, or CPS system lead educational programs.

In looking closely at power relationships between parents and child welfare workers, Bundy-Fazioli and her colleagues (2008) found that “how workers and parents choose to interact may influence service outcomes” (p. 2). They say that workers rarely receive training or assistance to learn how to balance power with clientele and avoid a hierarchal approach in spite of the fact that equitable relationships are encouraged. One finding of the study was that both parents and workers felt powerless. The parents felt controlled and judged by the courts and CPS, and the workers wanted to see their programs as voluntary, but in actuality they needed to admit that the parents had been mandated to attend. In fact, the workers were told that they were to be the “eyes and ears” of the court. They were to monitor the participants’ activities and let the court know how the families were doing. This situation created the conflict of interest previously mentioned as the leaders tried to reconcile those two very different functions.

So a unique ethical challenge of leading mandated programs is to try to maintain a strengths-based, empowerment approach in a system of court-based power, mandates, and judgments. Educators receive the advantages of programming to a mandated audience, freeing them from recruitment tasks, but they need to avoid letting that freedom allow them to ignore the process of making programs inviting, collaborative, and effective. They also need to try to separate the roles of educator, monitor, and adjudicator as much as possible.

### **Best Practices in Family Life Education Programming**

None of the domains of programming discussed in this chapter is fully developed and well established regarding best practices. Addressing mandated programs for abuse/neglect, Barth and colleagues (2005) reviewed parent training and support efforts using the standards of evidence as set by the American Psychological Association (APA) and found that “there is not a single intervention that has generated a published peer-review article based on a study in which they accepted referrals from a child welfare agency, randomly assigned them to a treatment condition, and evaluated the outcome” (p. 359). At the same time, these authors reported that a number of the programs listed in this chapter met somewhat less stringent requirements. In lieu of meeting APA evidence-based expectations, they suggested criteria such as accessibility of manuals, face validity of the content, good administrative support, successful on-the-ground experience, basic evaluation data, brevity, low cost per family, no requirement of advanced training for leaders, recognition that some parents will have their children at home and others will not, and concepts that are easy for participants to grasp.

Another similar but broader approach to determining the quality of curricula used for family life education in general is called the Family Life Education Materials Quality Assessment Tool (Myers-Walls, 2010). This tool could be applied to any materials to be used with mandated or nonmandated parents or families. The criteria considered important for curricula include author/creator qualifications, the inclusion of citations supporting the research base of the material and a clear connection between the research base and the program, a clear indication of the intended level of impact of the program, clear and measurable objectives, an explicit values orientation, inclusion of statements communicating the importance of the information for the program participants, appropriateness of activities and topics for the target audience, clear and easy-to-follow instructions for the leader, attractive and useful handouts, a variety of activities, suggestions of additional materials and resources for participants, labeling of statements as facts or theories or opinions, inclusion of results of previous evaluation studies, inclusion of strategies and forms to support the collection of evaluation data from participants, inclusion of all materials necessary for the program, and a recognition of the context of children and families that would impact the application of the program skills and recommendations. These criteria can guide both the assessment of materials and the creation of new curricula items.

More specific guidelines are available to advance the state of adoptive and foster care training—particularly regarding treatment foster care. The Foster Family-Based Treatment Association: Program Standards for Treatment Foster Care state the following criteria of excellence: “. . . a strengths-based approach, an affirmation

of children's natural families and their needs for permanent homes, and of cultural diversity" (Dorsey et al., 2008, p. 1406). Those value-related principles along with the more general criteria previously listed provide a structure for beginning to evaluate programs and for developing new ones.

Best practices for programs targeting divorcing parents have been suggested by some authors, but the content of those recommendations varies by the perspective of the author. The same is true for programming aimed at abusive and neglectful parents and parents of children in the juvenile justice system. Shannon (n.d.) has listed several best practices for programs aimed at preventing child abuse:

- Target as many risk factors as possible.
- Try to impact knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations of participants.
- Work with parents often and for an extended period of time.
- The quality of the leaders and parent educators is critical.
- Work with other agencies and organizations as appropriate.
- Tailor the services to meet the particular needs of individual participants as appropriate.
- Engage in careful and purposeful planning.

Carter and Kahn (1996) described parenting education, a term into which all three categories of mandated programming described here could fit, as an "emerging discipline" (p. v). Collaborative, research-based efforts can help the field and its demonstrated effectiveness to grow.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There are several controversies and questions that define the future directions for mandated programs for parents and families.

1. How can individuals be given choices and a sense of control when being mandated to attend family life education programs?
2. Should mandated and nonmandated program participants be combined in the same program groups?
3. Should both members of a divorcing couple be included in the same divorce education sessions together?
4. How can professionals from different disciplines work effectively together to serve the needs of parents and families?

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