Helping families cope

Australian parents are concerned about their relationships with their children, as well as with ways of managing children's behaviours. What is the nature of these concerns, and did enrolling in a Parent Effectiveness Training course make a difference?

A fresh look at parent effectiveness training

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A s with any other group of people, families have to find ways of relating together successfully and managing conflict between members, whether between parent and child, between siblings, or between the parents themselves. Their communication style, even the words they use, their relationships and their values inevitably affect the next generation in every family, and because the family is the basic unit of society, these also impact upon the wider community.

All families today have their share of unavoidable problems, including the vastly changed environment of parenting, the lack of precedents in how to manage the changes, and the differing views between generations about how children should be brought up. As well as these, there is a superabundance of conflicting advice on parenting from grandparents, books, magazines, and radio and television programs. More than a generation ago, Dreikurs and Soltz (1964) suggested that the spread of democratic ideas had rendered traditional parenting methods obsolete.

Research over the past ten years has placed a new emphasis on the importance of emotional health from the earliest years (McCain and Mustard 1999). Subsequent behaviour and the ability to manage emotion can be affected by the infant's interaction with the parent, but parental handling of emotional development is equally important in later childhood and adolescence (Resnick, Bearman, Blum, Bauman et al. 1997).

Neurological studies have shown that, contrary to the long-held view that emotion was somehow less important and less "worthy" than intellect, competence in handling emotions is just as crucial as cognitive skills (Bar-On 2001; Damasio 2000). Longitudinal studies such as the Australian Temperament Project have shown that some children need help in developing empathic understanding and emotional self-regulation, and that parents can help children of differing temperaments to acquire these attributes through individual variations in child management (Prior, Sanson, Smart and Oberklaid 2000).

Research has also suggested that, in "normal" families at least, emphasis should be shifted away from merely teaching

Picture: Alis Wood

children to be compliant, and directed more towards interpersonal relationships, a focus on emotional awareness and self-regulation for both parents and children, and the fostering of warm, affective bonds between them (McKenry and Price 1994). As will be seen, these issues are also identified as being of concern to parents.

Emergence of parenting programs

In Australia there has been considerable interest in parent education over the past decade. Parent education has been seen as one way to prevent child abuse and domestic violence and also as a means of strengthening parents' understanding of child development and competence in child management (Tomison 1998).

Approximately141 agency centres in major towns across Australia offer parenting and relationship education and support through numerous organisations – some local and others nationwide. These include courses in the major parenting program packages, generally on an ad hoc basis. The courses include: Triple P (Positive Parenting Program, Sanders 1996); STEP (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting, Dinkmeyer and McKay 1976); and PET (Parent Effectiveness Training, Gordon 1976).

All three parenting programs were derived from clinical research and subsequently developed for non-referred populations for prevention of problems, but they have different theoretical orientations – behavioural, Adlerian and humanistic respectively. The differences may not be readily apparent to parents looking for help in the task of bringing up their families. All three programs have been evaluated and found to produce positive outcomes.

Triple P stems from behaviour modification and learning theory, and was developed by Professor Matthew Sanders and his colleagues at the Parenting and Family Support Centre (PFSC) in the School of Psychology in the University of Queensland. The Triple P approach deals with parents and pre-adolescent children specifically on a behavioural level, using child-management skills such as clear, calm instruction, logical consequences for misbehaviour, planned ignoring, quiet time, and time-out.

STEP emanates from Adler's individual psychology further developed by Dreikurs, and was put together by Dinkmeyer and McKay (1976). Avoiding reward and punishment as a disciplinary method, STEP presents the use of natural and logical consequences to motivate children towards making responsible decisions. STEP in Australia is available through the Australian Council for Educational Research.

The *PET* program was developed by Thomas Gordon following his intensive research in humanistic psychology with Carl Rogers at the University of Chicago. Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) is specifically aimed at prevention of problems, improving the parent–child relationship and cutting out the use of reward and punishment. PET in Australia is available through the Effectiveness Training Institute of Australia, which is responsible for training and accrediting all instructors. It is essentially a community-based movement reaching about 900 parents

Picture: Alis Wood

annually. PET is a 24-hour course, generally presented in eight weekly three-hour sessions. The program comprises operational skills training in interpersonal communication, with an emphasis first on listening skills. Empathic or "active" listening is intensively taught followed by parental assertiveness, and these are combined with brainstorming for problem solving and the resolution of conflicts. Parents are trained to avoid responses which stall communication – known as *roadblocks*. These include using reassurance and unsought advice when listening to a troubled child, which to most people in our culture may seem counter-intuitive.

PET evaluation study

This article describes two aspects of a controlled evaluation of 25 Parent Effectiveness Training courses conducted by 11 qualified instructors in six Australian states. The first aspect of the study examined the issues that parents perceived in their management of their children's behaviour. The second examined the changes in parenting skills of the parents who completed a PET course and compared them with a group of 81 controls. For logistic reasons random allocation to control and PET groups was not possible, and controls were not specified as wait-list.

A total of 232 parents participated in this research. Participants were recruited through schools and community-based organisations. All participants provided a list of their parenting concerns. The PET and control group participants completed the Parent–Child Response Sheet (PCRS, Wood and Davidson 1987, 1994-1995) according to defined procedures. The PCRS asks participants to provide written responses to six standardised parent–child interactions requiring parental attention and conflict resolution. When administered pre and post the PET course, the PCRS provides a measure of the acquisition of listening and assertive skills, and the resolution of conflict. PET parents completed pre-test measures of parenting skills at the beginning of the course before any teaching had taken place, and post-tests on the same measures at the end of the course, while as far as possible the control parents completed the tests at the same eight-week interval. The measures were collected immediately and sent back to the experimenter, and no feedback was given to the parents.

Parenting concerns

At the pre-test, all the parents were asked to list their concerns about their children's behaviours and their parenting difficulties. The combined sample of parents (PET experimental parents and control parents) reported 1044 individual items of problematic child behaviours and issues, with a good deal of similarity and overlap. Most parents reported four or five issues of concern. The items were carefully scrutinised and collapsed into 60 categories, which were then grouped into three broad domains: child behavioural issues, parent–child relationship issues, and parents' self-management issues. Within each of these domains, the issues of concern were tabulated.

An examination of the most frequently reported issues provides an idea of the hierarchy of concerns as expressed by this sample of Australian parents,

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regardless of whether or not they had enrolled in a parenting course.

Highest were child management issues, which comprised 78.3 per cent of the total 1044 listed concerns. There were 172 issues (16.4 per cent) related to parent–child relationship concerns, and 55 were about parent self-management. The latter figure suggests that some parents already recognised the role of their parenting style and behaviour in the behavioural problems they reported in their children. A frequent explanation given here was that they hated yelling at the children, and wanted to find a different style of child management.

Of particular interest was the high frequency of concerns about sibling disputes and tidiness, more frequently cited than the concern about non-compliance with parents' requests, which came next. Children's self-centred behaviour was also noted frequently, followed by a perceived need for improved communication with children and better handling of parent–child conflicts about behaviours. There was concern about children's ability to concentrate on tasks including homework and chores, heeding requests, answering back, noise, aggressiveness and tantrums, as well as behaviour at meals and bedtime. Other complaints included socially inappropriate behaviour and language, and whining.

Issues less commonly mentioned were eating food provided, television and computer use, willingness to try new things, cooperation in setting boundaries, waking at night, resistance to school, moody behaviour, hygiene, destructiveness, toilet training, understanding the value of money, deception, forgetting agreements, choice of friends, hyperactive behaviour, unassertiveness, substance use, and physical risk-taking behaviour.

The second domain of parental issues comprised parents' own relationships with children and their concern about the children's relationships with their peers. Parents reported family harmony a desired objective more than twice as often as respect for people and rules, or for helping children to solve their problems.

Table 1	Sample of PET parents' responses at pre-test and post-test in *active listening*	

Parent-child response sheet
Question 1(a)

I don't know why the kids at school don't like me. I try ever so hard to make friends but they all tease me and make fun of me. I suppose it's because I'm not pretty. I wish I wasn't me.

PET parent	Pre/Post	Response
1. Female (QLD)	Pre-test	I love you the way you are. If you were not you, you wouldn't be mine and I would miss that.
	Post-test	You sound really upset about that.
2. Female (NSW)	Pre-test	Don't try so hard to make friends – they will come to you when you stop trying. You are a lovely person and there is a friend out there for everybody, including you.
	Post-test	You would like to have more friends and be liked by all children?
3. Male (ACT)	Pre-test	Well, I think you are pretty, and those kids are just being mean. Are there some other children you could be friends with?
	Post-test	You're dejected because the kids at school tease you when you want to make friends?

Note: Parents are from the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland (QLD).
Source: Parent–child response sheet, Parent Effectiveness Training.

A small number of parents in both control and PET groups acknowledged a perceived need to make some change in their parenting style. Two major self-management issues concerned the parent's personal need for recognition and the management of emotional reactivity. These were followed closely by concern about available time for dealing well with interpersonal aspects of family life. Two of the issues related to parents in families involved in divorce proceedings. It appears that while Australian parents primarily report common behaviour problems of their children, they also focus on the kind of relationship they have with their children, and the efficacy of their own styles of parenting.

Effect of the program

The second part of the study consisted of an examination of the qualitative differences shown pre-test versus post-test in the responses of the PET parents.

Active listening

Changes in parents' responses to the statements of children who were feeling troubled are shown by their active listening replies to the first question on the Parent–Child Response Sheets. Examples show important changes in the replies of trained parents, although naturally there is variation in the quality of responses. Table 1 shows three typical pre and post responses of PET parents.

The pre-test replies are typical examples of almost every parental response in the pre-test assessment of active listening. Each uses reassurance ("I love you the way you are", "You are a lovely person and there is a friend out there for everybody", "I think you are pretty, and those kids are just being mean") in response to the child's emotional outburst about lack of friends. In addition, one offers advice ("Don't try so hard to make friends") and another asks a probing question ("Are there some other children you could be friends with?"). None acknowledges the child's feelings. Reassurance and advice are the most frequent "helping" responses of our western culture for replying to almost anyone upset about a problem, an observation amply confirmed in the current study.

However, such responses are known in Parent Effectiveness Training as "roadblocks" which actually impede the helping process. Instead, PET parents are taught to focus particularly on the feelings, as well as the facts, and simply to feed back to the child their understanding of what the child has said. This is more effective at helping troubled people, including children, by acknowledging rather than dismissing their feelings, thus clearing the way for them to take charge of the problem if they can (Ginott 1969).

Post-test responses in Table 1 ("You sound really upset about that", "You would like to have more friends", "You're dejected because the kids at school tease you") show substantial changes in this direction from each of the PET participants. This was not shown among control parents in the study, as can be seen from the control parents' responses in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that at the pre-test, control parents 1 and 3 employ a reassuring statement in response to the child's emotional outburst about lack of friends. Parent 1 also asks a probing question. Parent 3 offers

Table 2	Sample of control parents' responses at pre-test and post-test in *active listening*

Parent-child response sheet
Question 1(a)

I don't know why the kids at school don't like me. I try ever so hard to make friends but they all tease me and make fun of me. I suppose it's because I'm not pretty. I wish I wasn't me.

Control parent	Pre/Post	Response
1. Female (QLD)	Pre-test	What do you like about you? Let's work out a way of letting the kids at school know that you are who you are, and there is much to like about you.
	Post-test	Do you think kids know what being "pretty" means? I bet they don't. I know you are bright and you are attractive. Let's work on being happy…
2. Male (VIC)	Pre-test	Girls can be bitchy sometimes. Can't they? I guess they will mature eventually. How about we go shopping and check out the new summer range?
	Post-test	It is difficult with immature people, but they will grow up some day. Perhaps we could go shopping this week.
3. Male (WA)	Pre-test	Darling you are pretty. You are beautiful. Maybe you try too hard to make friends. You could just be friendly and other children will be friendly back. I am delighted that you're you, and wouldn't want you to be anyone else. I love you exactly as you are.
	Post-test	Darling maybe you try too hard to make friends. The best way to make friends is to be friendly to everyone. I think you're beautiful and I love you very much.

Note: Parents are from Queensland (QLD), Victoria (VIC) and Western Australia (WA)
Source: Parent–child response sheet, Parent Effectiveness Training.

Table 3	Sample of in PET parents' responses at pre-test and post-test in *assertiveness*

Parent-child response sheet
Question 2(a)

What would you say if you were the parent in this situation? You are backing the car and you nearly hit your 12 year-old son's bike, which is left on its side right in the way.

PET parent	Pre/Post	Response
1. Female (QLD)	Pre-test	I nearly ran over your bike because you left it in the driveway. Be more responsible and thoughtful, and put your things away please.
	Post-test	I am really upset that your bike was left in the driveway because I almost ran over it, and it would have cost a lot of money to replace as well as damage to our car.
2. Female (NSW)	Pre-test	Now this is what happens when you don't take responsibility for your own things. If I had hit it, you'd be without a bike. Please learn from this – this is *your* bike.
	Post-test	When you leave your bike lying in the drive way, I get upset because I have to get out of my car to move it.
3. Male (ACT)	Pre-test	I've told you before, you must keep your bike out of the way. I can't check behind the car every time, and it will get run over if it's in the way.
	Post-test	I get really annoyed when stuff is left in the way of the car, because it might damage the car if it gets run over.

Note: Parents are from the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland (QLD).
Source: Parent–child response sheet, Parent Effectiveness Training.

advice. Parent 1 takes over the problem and, together with parent 2, suggests a diversion. Parents 2 and 3 analyse the problem. Each of these responses is contraindicated in PET for replying to children who are upset. The control parents use the same kinds of responses in the post-test as they did in the pre-test, although the wording is slightly different.

Table 4	Sample of control parents' responses at pre-test and post-test in *assertiveness*	
Parent-child response sheet **Question 2(a)**		
What would you say if you were the parent in this situation? You are backing the car and you nearly hit your 12-year-old son's bike, which is left on its side right in the way.		
Control parent	**Pre/Post**	**Response**
1. Female (QLD)	Pre	Your bike is your responsibility to look after and park properly just the same as I do for my car. If you want a bike as well as other possessions you must take care of them.
	Post	If you don't appreciate your things and look after them you can't expect them to be safe and ready for you to use again. Put your bike away and think about what might have happened.
2. Male (VIC)	Pre	Your bike is off limits this week, locked in the shed. It will be two weeks next time.
	Post	Your bike is now confiscated for a week. Tell me why!
3. Male (WA)	Pre	I nearly ran over your bike. I have told you before to put things away when you have finished playing with them. You would be very upset if I crushed your bike. Please put it away.
	Post	I have told you to put your bike away when you stop using it. What do you think would have happened if I had run over your bike?

Note: Parents are from Queensland (QLD), Victoria (VIC) and Western Australia (WA).
Source: Parent–child response sheet, Parent Effectiveness Training.

Table 5	Sample of PET parents' responses at pre-test and post-test in *conflict resolution*	
Parent-child response sheet **Question 3(b)**		
It's not fair. Peter always changes the channel when I'm watching TV, and he doesn't ever change it for me when he's watching, and now Dad wants his program on, and I can't watch at all.		
PET parent	**Pre/Post**	**Response**
1. Female (QLD)	Pre-test	Go and do something else.
	Post-test	You sound upset that you don't get to watch your program. Can you think of any solutions that might satisfy everyone?
2. Female (NSW)	Pre-test	We should plan beforehand who is watching what, so there is no need to change channels between programs.
	Post-test	Let's see if we can work this out, what do you think? We can take turns and maybe plan it beforehand.
3. Male (ACT)	Pre-test	Hmm. Looks like we need to sort out the TV watching. We'll work something out after I've watched this program!
	Post-test	Sounds like everybody wants to watch the TV at the same time. I wonder how we can work it out so that people get to watch what they want?

Note: Parents are from the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland (QLD).
Source: Parent–child response sheet, Parent Effectiveness Training.

Assertiveness

Changes in the responses of three PET parents on assertiveness following Parent Effectiveness Training are shown in Table 3. Although the pre-test replies are generally polite they do convey blame. It should be mentioned that many pre-test replies were not as polite, but in any case the reserve shown by these three parents could perhaps be due to respect for the experimental context rather than for the hypothetical child. However, they do employ advice, threat of consequences, and nagging, which are antagonistic to assertive communication, although most of them, except for nagging and guilt, are quite legitimate when there is no problem between parent and child.

Instead, PET parents are taught to describe unacceptable behaviours factually without using blame, and to add their own feelings (in the first person, called *I-Messages*) as well as the cost to them of the behaviour. This shifts the focus from shaming the child to maintaining the relationship between them and thus opens the way for the child to make a change. Resentment is less likely.

The three post-test responses demonstrate some change in the direction of this non-antagonistic parental assertiveness, although there is still room for improvement. PET parents are encouraged to be specific about their feelings, and to express the *underlying* emotion in order to increase both self-awareness and the effectiveness of the response. The examples in Table 3 could have better been expressed in terms of anxiety about damage to the car and the sudden fright caused by almost hitting the bike.

Table 4 shows the responses from three control parents. Each of them has employed blaming statements, while parents 1 and 3 threaten consequences. At the post-test, each of the participants continued to use blaming statements, while parent 2 used punishment. Parents 1 and 3 included threats of consequences. Although parent 3 used an "I-statement", blame was conveyed which is not recommended in PET.

Table 5 shows the changes in the responses of three PET parents in conflict resolution situations following training. Each of the pre-test responses used a unilateral solution, with one dismissing both the child and the problem, and one proposing a better way. In conflict resolution training, PET parents are taught to employ active listening to understand the needs felt by the children, assertiveness to state their own needs, and brainstorming to find as many creative solutions as possible, before working together on a mutual solution. Here again, the focus is shifted after PET, from more directive responses from parents to joint decision making. The process is based on openness to possibilities as well as on actively seeking the children's ideas.

The control parents' responses are shown in Table 6. Although control parents 1 and 3 suggested that a fair compromise must be sought, they (along with all the others) unilaterally proposed the solutions to be followed. Parent 2 was able to "active listen", but asked the child for agreement to *his* solution. None of the parents asked for suggestions from the child, which is recommended in PET aspects of conflict resolution.

Changes in parents' response

Changes in parents' response

Tables 1, 3 and 5 show how, following Parenting Effectiveness Training, parents in widely different locations, and with different instructors, showed cognitive changes in language and attitude as well as in awareness of feelings.

Compared to the control parents, the replies that appear in the accompanying tables were typical of those from all Australian states and demonstrate varying levels of effective communication through active listening, assertiveness, and skills in conflict resolution. They can also be seen to be individual and personal, reflecting the diversity of the respondents. The emerging type of response seen in the post-test appears to reflect the positive communication patterns of "strong families" (De Frain 1999).

This study is the first controlled experimental investigation of PET to have focused on actual linguistic changes made by parents following the course. The changes appear to reflect not only attitudinal shifts towards a more collaborative style of parenting, but also document changes in choice of language and behaviour on the part of parents.

Conclusion

Family experience is important for children's emotional understanding, through parental empathic listening and modelling. Acceptance of personal responsibility occurs when assertiveness is sensitive and socially appropriate to the context. It requires parents' self-regulated emotional learning, and is aimed at eliciting children's cooperation without damaging the relationship, an essential criterion for effectiveness and one which people find difficult to acquire. This research points to the contemporary relevance of PET, which has focused on these methods to improve relationships.

Zhou et al. (2002) showed in a longitudinal study that children's negative behaviours were mediated by parents' emotion-related socialisation practices. The current investigation has demonstrated cognitive and structural change in the verbal expression of emotion-related socialisation practices in a large group of parents following Parent Effectiveness Training. Further research is required to assess the behavioural outcomes for children in PET families.

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Table 6	Sample of control parents' responses at pre-test and post-test in *conflict resolution*

Parent-child response sheet
Question 3(b)

It's not fair. Peter always changes the channel when I'm watching TV, and he doesn't ever change it for me when he's watching, and now Dad wants his program on, and I can't watch at all.

Control parent	Pre/Post	Response
1. Female (QLD)	Pre	We all have to learn to share the TV and compromise over what we watch. Not everyone will always get what they want – but it should be a fair system all round.
	Post	We all have to compromise and watch some of what we want and some of what others want. Nobody gets their own way all of the time.
2. Male (VIC)	Pre	It is disappointing when that happens, but Mums and Dads pay the bills so I guess they expect to be able to watch their special programs. But I think I might have a word with that bossy boots Peter.
	Post	It is tough being the littlest. How about we sit down and work out the program you really want to watch and the ones your brother really wants and we will guarantee them for each of you. Okay?
3. Male (WA)	Pre	Life is not fair. Life is what you make it. Everyone can watch TV but you can't all watch different things at the same time. You need to talk to Peter and Mum so that you can all see some TV programs you like. Go and talk to Mum now.
	Post	That's right darling. There is no such thing as fair. If you want to watch a program you need to negotiate with Peter and tell Mummy or Daddy if he won't negotiate.

Note: Parents are from Queensland (QLD), Victoria (VIC) and Western Australia (WA).
Source: Parent–child response sheet, Parent Effectiveness Training.