

# Parenting Educator Guide



## Make Parenting A Pleasure<sup>®</sup>

Second Edition



*Parenting Now!*



# Make Parenting A Pleasure

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## Parenting Educator Guide

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*Parenting Now!*



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# WELCOME TO *MAKE PARENTING A PLEASURE*



A warm welcome to *Make Parenting A Pleasure*. I believe you'll find that this curriculum represents an approach to parenting and parenting education that is based on a deep respect for parents and their children. The foundation was built on an understanding of how to support families gained through many years of collective experience as well as on current research and best practices.

Our goal in developing this program and curriculum is to make it accessible to the Parenting Educator as well as the parents.

We've learned that the approach, the message of respect, as well as the concepts and ease of use has made *Make Parenting A Pleasure* effective across communities, cultures and countries, from Leadville, Colorado, and East Orange, New Jersey, to Medgidia, Romania, and Pune, India.

I invite you to absorb the philosophy and concepts of *Make Parenting A Pleasure* while you also bring your personality, wisdom, and passion to the program. And I also invite you to make this experience meaningful...and definitely a pleasure.

Minalee Saks

First Edition Author

Founding Director Emerita

Parenting Now!



## INTRODUCTION

*Make Parenting A Pleasure* is an evidence-based parenting education curriculum developed by Parenting Now!. Founded in 1978 as Birth To Three, Parenting Now!'s mission is to provide the community of parents and educators the tools and resources to create and sustain healthy, safe environments for children. Our vision is that all children are raised by nurturing, skilled parents. We seek to strengthen families, decrease the potential for child abuse and neglect, and help ensure that children enter school ready to learn.

Parenting Now! accomplishes our mission through the delivery, development, and distribution of research-based, culturally appropriate parenting education tools, resources, training, and services. We provide direct services to our local community, and we develop and distribute our curricula and training around the United States and the world.

Parenting Now! developed the *Make Parenting A Pleasure* program in 1983 in collaboration with the Eugene Family YMCA in Eugene, Oregon, to serve families whose life circumstances place their children at risk for school failure and greater risk for abuse and neglect. The program was designed to help reduce the stress that families experienced and improve their relationships with their children. The group format of *Make Parenting A Pleasure* helps reduce the isolation some parents feel by putting them in touch with others in similar situations. The discussions and activities promote a positive approach to parenting and discipline, help parents create a nurturing and responsive relationship with their children, develop realistic expectations about their children and parenting, and teach the skills parents need to manage stress.

The curriculum was published in 1997 in response to requests from parenting professionals in other communities who asked our organization to share what we had learned through providing the *Make Parenting A Pleasure* program. Since the curriculum was first published, there has been much research on the various factors that affect the development of infants and young children. Experts in many fields have contributed to this robust discussion, including scholars and researchers in early childhood development, neurobiology, sociology, psychology, health, the study of chronic disease, parenting education, learning theory, and others.

Each field of study adds its piece of information to the picture. But they all agree on this one critical fact: **The first years of a child's life are the most important for setting a strong foundation for lifelong health and wellness.** Children thrive and continue to do well throughout their life when they grow up in families where they are loved and nurtured. Parents can best nurture their children when they have the support, resources, and information they need. This is the foundational principle of the *Make Parenting A Pleasure* curriculum.

## ABOUT THE SECOND EDITION



The overall philosophy, theoretical approach and methodology, as well as many topics have been carried over from the original *Make Parenting A Pleasure* curriculum to the Second Edition, with content re-arranged between sessions to improve the flow of discussion. The skills-building videos accompanying most sessions have been updated, and all discussions have been fully scripted for the Parenting Educator.

*Make Parenting A Pleasure* has always been set apart from other parenting curricula by its emphasis on anger and stress management and building communication skills. The Second Edition expands these areas through the inclusion of the most recent research on the physiology and neurobiology of stress. Parents learn the impact of family stress on their children's physical, social, and emotional development and how to create a positive family life. Throughout the sessions, strategies to buffer family stress are introduced, practiced, and reinforced.

The qualities and benefits of a nurturing parent-child relationship are woven throughout the curriculum. Many of the activities in the Second Edition that promote a close, nurturing parent-child relationship are informed by newer research on children's brain development. Examples include positive attention, which helps develop attachment and builds a child's neural connections and emotion coaching, which promotes a child's physical health, academic performance and social competence, and decreases behavioral problems.



# THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF *MAKE PARENTING A PLEASURE*

## The Importance of Effective Childrearing

Parents are children's earliest and most important influence. Studies spanning decades underline this important role and inform us about the parent attitudes, practices, and family contexts that foster children's healthy development. Yet, despite the good intentions of many parents, the growth in scientific knowledge around parenting and efforts to disseminate this knowledge, many parents struggle to be effective and to provide their children with an optimal context for development.

Of course, parents do not raise their children in a vacuum. Multiple influences are in play. Parents may contend with limited support, poverty, barriers to education and resources, stress, and a host of other environmental factors that affect parenting. Parenting efforts can be undermined by individual parent factors such as psychological distress, substance use disorders, and harmful childrearing practices, as well as contextual factors such as conflicted family relations and economic strain.

Much of what we know about the effect of negative experiences in childhood originated with the landmark Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study.<sup>1</sup> Multiple studies based on data from the original ACE study examined the relationship between childhood experiences and adult well-being. Two of the most important findings are:

1. Adverse childhood experiences are very common, and
2. A strong relationship exists between the number of ACEs in childhood and a person's physical and mental health later in life.

A child who is exposed to a negative experience will experience stress, and his body will respond by releasing a surge of hormones. This is a normal response to stress. But with chronic, ongoing stress, this "normal" response can cause lifelong problems. Research on the developing brain has provided extensive evidence that a child's early experiences shape the brain in the areas of learning, memory, socialization, emotional expression, self-regulation, and executive functions. Chronic stress response in early childhood can lead to developmental delays and behavioral problems; can impair a child's ability to bond with others; can contribute to cognitive problems; and can increase susceptibility to health problems as an adult.<sup>2</sup>

In a study on stress conducted by the American Psychological Association, 33% of US parents reported extreme stress levels, and the majority indicated that their stress levels exceeded their definition of what is healthy. Forty-six percent said they lost patience or yelled at their spouse, partner, or children when stressed over the last month. Stressed parents experience reduced pleasure in parenting and an increase in negative thoughts or feelings that can result in harsh and over-reactive parenting. Parents with high-stress



levels are also less responsive and affectionate and engage in fewer positive interactions with their children than parents who are not stressed.<sup>3</sup> Children of highly stressed parents are more likely to experience adverse childhood experiences such as child abuse or neglect, parental substance abuse or maternal depression, which can set the stage for developmental and behavioral problems.<sup>4</sup>

Research supports the effectiveness of parenting education in preventing and reducing childhood stress and adversity and helping parents build nurturing family environments that can mitigate the harmful effects of toxic stress.<sup>5,6</sup> The discussions and activities in *Make Parenting A Pleasure* help parents learn to reduce and manage family stress and build resilience by practicing self-care and stress-management strategies. Parenting stress is addressed directly through evidence-based strategies such as building a support network, engaging in pleasurable activities, and participating in activities to get parents in touch with their values.

### **Research-Informed Parenting Education**

*Make Parenting A Pleasure* is grounded in the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework, a research-informed, strengths-based preventive framework developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP).<sup>7,8</sup> Recognizing that early childhood is the most critical and also the most vulnerable time in a child's development, the CSSP incorporated a broad range of research into the development of the Protective Factors.

The Protective Factors emphasize strategies to protect and increase positive factors that reduce stress and lead to healthy family development. The result is a family-centered approach focusing on strategies and attitudes parents need to manage the stressors of daily life; handle anxiety or other negative feelings; and provide a healthy environment for their children. The Protective Factors aim to strengthen families by promoting parental resilience, developing social connections, providing concrete support in times of need, improving parents' knowledge of parenting and child development, and increasing parents' understanding of the social and emotional competence of children.

*Make Parenting A Pleasure* is informed by the latest research about childrearing factors known to promote children's healthy development. Based on this research, *Make Parenting A Pleasure* provides three levels of support and education:

1. ***Make Parenting A Pleasure* groups provide informational, social, and emotional support.** The parenting group is a safe place where parents can let down their defenses, open up, self-reflect, learn new information and skills, and gain support from others.



2. ***Make Parenting A Pleasure* guides parents in self-care.** Parents learn to handle stress more effectively and create routines that support their own satisfaction and well-being. Evidence is clear on this point: when parents are nurtured and supported, children benefit. These research-informed approaches are embedded in the curriculum. From the first group session and throughout, parents are guided in getting in touch with their values and goals for themselves, their families, and their children. Parents create opportunities for pleasurable activities, both on their own and as a family. Parents learn to cultivate self-compassion and engage in healthy self-care activities. To handle the inevitable stressors that arise, parents are taught practices to reduce the harmful stress response, such as deep breathing and “stepping back,” giving parents an opportunity to reflect and respond thoughtfully according to their values, rather than in an automatic, reactive way.
3. ***Make Parenting A Pleasure* helps parents provide a positive, nurturing environment for their children. Studies show that within this type of supportive relationship, children can thrive and be healthy throughout their life, even if they are exposed to chronic, ongoing stress.** Parents play a critical role in providing children with a sense of safety and security so their children can freely explore and interact with the environment. When parents respond to children’s exploration through frequent “serve and return” interactions, by regularly noticing and responding to the child’s invitations to interact and communicate, they help promote a deeper parent-child relationship. Parents can provide structure, helping children know what to expect, through routines, family rules, and discipline strategies that foster cooperation, self-discipline, and goodwill. Parents also learn about ways to be sensitive and responsive to their individual children, understanding children’s temperament, and emotion coaching methods. Within this environment of consistent parenting responses, children learn to regulate their behaviors and emotions, laying a strong foundation for improved social and emotional development and resilience throughout their lives.

*Make Parenting A Pleasure* is designed for today’s parents. Parents learn to consider and create what is meaningful and important in their families and to address those factors that get in the way. In the group, parents build a support network and engage in stress-reduction and positive coping strategies, while also learning evidence-based strategies for effective childrearing to help their child grow and thrive.



### **Efficacy of *Make Parenting A Pleasure***

The *Make Parenting A Pleasure* curriculum has been evaluated for efficacy in a randomized clinical trial with a wait-list control group in 2015. The evaluation was funded by the Education Development Center on behalf of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Participants were parents with children aged birth to eight years of age.

### **Evaluation results demonstrated that the curriculum is effective in improving outcomes for stressed families.**

- *Make Parenting A Pleasure* was found to significantly increase parenting skills and parents' knowledge of child development and behavior.
- Participants in the *Make Parenting A Pleasure* program reported significantly decreased symptoms of depression at the end of the evaluation period. Symptoms of depression were assessed in the evaluation because of the high prevalence of postpartum mood disorder, and because depression in either the mother or father, or both, reduces parental resilience, makes social connections more difficult, and hinders effective parenting.
- Participants reported high satisfaction with the group. They also reported that the sessions were helpful and they would recommend the group to other parents. Both of these indicate that the program was well accepted.
- Parents highlighted the importance of connecting with other parents and learning to deal with stress.

### **Evaluating Your Program**

A *Mid-Course Feedback* form is included in Session 5. The questionnaire is designed to provide valuable information for the Parenting Educator and the Program Manager for making adjustments in the remaining sessions. The questionnaire asks parents to provide input on their experience in the group; the balance between topics, activities, and parent discussions; and logistical questions such as pace, time allotted for questions, and sense of connection with the group. The questionnaire also asks parents to indicate what they considered most useful and what they would improve about the sessions.

We have also included the Parenting Skills Ladder (PSL),<sup>9</sup> which covers all of the features of the curriculum. The PSL was developed at Oregon State University (OSU) as a tool to support the evaluation of parenting education series. The PSL uses a retrospective pretest approach and is designed to be used at the end of a parenting



education series such as *Make Parenting A Pleasure*. At the conclusion of the group, parents are asked to rate themselves on their current parenting knowledge and practices as well as their child's behavior. Parents are then asked to think back and rate themselves on their knowledge and practices before they started the parenting series.

The PSL may be used for educational, research, and non-profit purposes for distribution in programs working with families of children ages 0-8. Parenting Now! includes it with the express approval from OSU and is using the version that best fits the *Make Parenting A Pleasure* content. You can learn more about the PSL or find updated versions here: <https://orparenting.org/parenting-skills-ladder/>

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# GROUP PROCESS



## **The Heart of *Make Parenting A Pleasure*: The Group**

The parent group is the heart of *Make Parenting A Pleasure*. The group can be a place for parents to connect with other parents, communicate their feelings and needs, and begin to develop skills to cope more effectively with day-to-day stress and the stress of parenting.

Participation in the group helps parents normalize their own experiences and build confidence in their own skills and knowledge. More importantly, the *Make Parenting A Pleasure* group helps them develop a strong support network, one they can turn to for help and support when needed. Parents begin to realize that they are not alone in facing challenges or adversity.

## ***Make Parenting A Pleasure* Basic Assumptions**

The *Make Parenting A Pleasure* group is a place for parents to take a break from the stresses of everyday life and do something positive and affirming for themselves and their children within an environment of acceptance and mutual support.

**The following assumptions are critical to the *Make Parenting A Pleasure* group environment:**

- Parents are the *foundation of the family*. Parents need information about parenting and support in order to be the best parents they can be.
- *Parenting is learned*. No one is born knowing how to be a parent.
- Sometimes we think parenting should be easy, but *for many parents it is the most challenging job they'll ever have* because it is the most personal and most important job they'll ever have.
- *There are many right ways to parent*. We believe that parents try to make the best decisions they can for their children. Sharing information and experiences with other parents and learning what “experts” have to say can help parents make decisions and choices.
- In *Make Parenting A Pleasure* we believe that *parents attend parenting groups because they care deeply about their children* and want to do the best job they can in raising them.
- There is no such thing as a perfect parent. *Parents are here to learn from and encourage one another*.



- *Taking care of yourselves and getting support is critical.* When parents take care of themselves and get support for the important job of parenting, the whole family benefits.
- *Children are positively motivated to get their needs met.* While there are times that children’s behavior is confusing or challenging to parents, they continue to see their children’s behavior as an effort to communicate a need. When parents take care of themselves and get support, they are more able to meet their children’s needs.

**Our goal is that parents enjoy their *Make Parenting A Pleasure* group!**

### **Adapting the Curriculum for Each Group**

The *Make Parenting A Pleasure* curriculum gives parents the opportunity to learn new information, feel validated, and form a social network with other parents of young children. The following information will help Parenting Educators make their parenting groups successful.

*Make Parenting A Pleasure* will be most successful if each Parenting Educator makes the language and style of presentation “their own” and adjusts to the needs and ability levels of the participants. Awareness of and sensitivity to the parents’ ethnic and cultural backgrounds are essential. While the Home Practices and material in the Parent Booklet have been written for a fifth- to eighth-grade reading level, additional adjustments may be needed according to the needs and interests of families in the group.

The material in the sessions is written for adults who are the primary caregivers for young children. “Parent” may refer to biological parents, adoptive parents, foster parents, grandparents, or other relatives. We have made an effort to vary gender references throughout the curriculum, alternating examples of she and he, her and him, and girls’ and boys’ names.

### **Cultural Considerations**

Some families in the *Make Parenting A Pleasure* groups may have different cultural traditions from each other. The discussions and activities have been developed to be respectful and inclusive. Differing values and norms among parents in the group provide opportunities for all the group members, as they learn to value and respect themselves and each other and develop social bonds.



## Principles of Adult Learning

- *Adults learn through experience.* Parents bring a history of experience into the group, and they want to know how the discussions and activities will apply to their lives. It is important for the Parenting Educator to respect the participants' experiences. Parents will absorb the presented material better if they are involved actively in doing, showing, or talking about the concepts and techniques being covered.
- *Adults prefer to be in charge of their learning.* The role of the Parenting Educator is to present concepts, suggestions, and information. The parents will make decisions on how the information fits into their own lives. The Parenting Educator can help parents tap into their resources as well as the resources of others in the group and the community—all within a climate that is respectful, informal, and collaborative.
- *Adults take in information in a variety of ways.* When presenting material, it is important to involve parents not only verbally but also through sight, touch, movement, and actual practice. Allow them to draw on their experiences. Practice is extremely helpful. The activities in *Make Parenting A Pleasure* give parents the opportunity to absorb the material through a number of different avenues.
- *Adults are motivated to participate for a variety of reasons.* It is important to understand what parents' motivations are and to find a way to directly benefit the parents in the group. A good place to begin to understand parents' reasons for being there is the Identifying Our Values and Goals discussion in Session 1.

## Group Process Skills

In our group work, we have found a number of attributes that effective Parenting Educators have in common. They:

- Create an environment in which each parent feels welcome, respected, and valued.
- Encourage parents to support and connect with each other.
- Listen for what parents want and adjust the curriculum to meet the group's needs.
- Listen for the curriculum principles in what parents say.



- Ask questions to promote problem solving within the group.
- Acknowledge each parent's contribution.
- Show involvement through body language and eye contact.
- Express enthusiasm and energy.
- Use appropriate humor to make the group fun and work for a balance of serious discussions and times to be light.
- Keep group members focused.
- Pace the discussion so parents can contribute and respond.
- Encourage parents to listen to one another without passing judgment.
- Emphasize similarities and contributions by linking one parent's comment to another's during the discussions.
- Summarize to clarify information and ideas expressed by group members.
- Be honest about what they don't know and are prepared to direct parents to outside resources for additional information or help.
- Respect the experience parents bring to the group.
- Keep self-disclosure to a minimum.

### **Referrals to Community Resources**

There may be times when a Parenting Educator feels a parent needs a referral for additional help beyond what he or she or the parent group can provide. We suggest the Parenting Educator speak with the parent privately to gather additional information and provide a referral to a community agency for additional support if needed. When a Parenting Educator suspects that a parent might be harmful or neglectful to their child, he or she should follow the mandatory reporting laws for their state or jurisdiction.

As a Parenting Educator, it is important to know the local resources available to support parents with issues of mental health, mental illness, drug and alcohol problems, child abuse, or intimate partner violence. While it is not within the scope of this curriculum to provide names of local resources, on some topics we have provided national resources. We rely on the Parenting Educators to make local resource information available to any parent who needs a referral.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it has taken the combined work of many people and organizations to prepare *Make Parenting A Pleasure, Second Edition*. First, many thanks to those who developed the *Make Parenting A Pleasure* program: Birth To Three/Parenting Now! Founding Director Emerita **Minalee Saks, MS**, and co-authors **Ellen Hyman, Linda Reilly, MSW**, and **Juvata Rusch, MA, MS**. Their vision and creativity remain central to this work.

This Second Edition was made possible through grants from **The Collins Foundation, The Ford Family Foundation, Pacific Northwest Publishing, Spirit Mountain Community Fund**, and the **Union Pacific Foundation**. Without these contributions, this project would not have been possible.

**Leslie Finlay, MA**, developed the Second Edition. Leslie first joined Parenting Now! as a Parenting Educator in 1991 and has been supporting parents with young children ever since. With extensive experience in prevention, intervention, curriculum development and training, she holds an MA in Early Intervention and is currently the Director of Early Childhood Programs at Relief Nursery, Inc. in Eugene, Oregon. Leslie and her partner, Jake, have two daughters, Emma and Audrey, who truly have made parenting a pleasure.

**Laura Backen Jones, PhD**, was instrumental in the project's development from start to finish. Laura is a former Parenting Now! Parenting Educator, a developmental psychologist teaching at Linn-Benton Community College, and a research scientist at Oregon Research Institute. She is co-author of *Parenting: The First Three Years*. As the *Make Parenting A Pleasure, Second Edition* project consultant, writer and technical expert, Laura's expertise in curriculum development and evidence-based parenting interventions were invaluable.

**Pamela Evanston**, Program Manager and Training Manager at Parenting Now!, made her mark on each and every aspect of the Second Edition. She served as a curriculum developer and content expert, collaborating on the development of big-picture ideas, structure, and organization as well as ongoing problem-solving at a sentence-by-sentence level, offering editorial fixes when no one else could.

**Pamella Crown**, Copy Editor, has deep expertise in curriculum development and the superior skill with which she refined and edited the Second Edition cannot be overstated. Pamella's wholehearted commitment to this project and the quality and high standard with which she touched every page are deeply appreciated.

We are also grateful for the valuable input we received from our content reviewers, including Mary Rothbart, PhD; John Seely, PhD; Carol Metzler, PhD; and Mark Eddy, PhD.



Special recognition goes to the Parenting Now! Parenting Educators who facilitated pilot parenting groups during various stages of this revision: Pamela Evanston; Leslie Finlay, MA; Chris Mayes, MA; and Dianne Reinmuth, MA.

Other Parenting Now! staff who contributed to the project include Lynne Swartz, MPH, Executive Director; Susan Schroeder, MPH, MCHES, Project Manager; Mika Singer, MS, Managing Director; Sarah Lame, MS, Parenting Educator; and Claire Davis, MS, Supervisor, Healthy Families.

Others who were essential to the creation of the Second Edition and whom we wish to acknowledge, include our project partners and video production company, Pacific Northwest Publishing; graphic artist Beverly McDonald; graphic designer Laren Rusch Watson, and Coleen Alexander, project coordinator.

And, finally, a special thanks to the Parenting Now! parents, who through the years have shared their experiences with us at a very special time in their families' lives. They have been our inspiration and our teachers. We cannot thank them enough for all we learned from them and their children.

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