

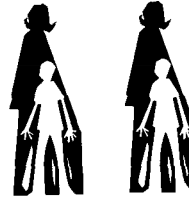
The Parent Education & Assistance Project:

A programme for single mothers & their children

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Introduction

The Parent Education and Assistance Project (PEAP) is a pilot programme aiming to develop and evaluate a range of services for single parent families with pre-school children within Fremantle, Western Australia.

The Project is funded by the Office of Child Care, Department of Social Security under their "Alternatives to Residential Care for Children" programme, and is sponsored by the Western Australian Department for Community Welfare. The overriding goal of the Project is to support and strengthen vulnerable parent-child relationships with the aim of preventing the necessity for substitute care of the children.

The Project is preventative and thus concerned with the wide range of problems which may precede, and be a symptom of family breakdown. Examples of these pro-

blems include children's behaviour problems; unrealistic expectations of child behaviour; child abuse and neglect. There are also many factors which may affect a parent's ability to cope such as: social and geographical isolation, depression, low self-esteem, poverty, poor health, and lack of recreational or social outlets.

An additional goal of the Project is to develop and evaluate a model parent programme for use, or adaptation, by other groups in related areas of need. To this end the Project is being very well documented and its methods are being independently evaluated. Detailed Progress Reports are produced bi-annually, a child development Manual has been developed (Constable et al, 1977); staff training programmes have been recorded; and indexes of relevant resources (e.g. films and group discussions) are available for use by other groups.

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General Objective

The general objective of the programme is: "To maximise the chances of single parents keeping their children in their own care as opposed to placing them in residential or foster care, by improving the quality of the parent-child relationship." (Drake-Brockman & Constable, 1976).

The services which constitute this preventative programme are both supportive and educative. It aims to promote a positive, stable, and educationally effective relationship between parent and child. The programme endeavours to provide parents with knowledge and skills related to child rearing, support

during stressful periods, information about community resources, a range of practical services, and the opportunity to gain self-confidence and independence. Optimal development for the children involved is an additional goal.

Definition of "Single Parent"

For the purposes of the Parent Education and Assistance Project the term "single parent" refers to those who are separated, divorced or unmarried. At the time of recruitment all parents involved are in receipt of a Supporting Parents' Pension or the State Government equivalent and are therefore unified by their low socio-economic status.

Both single mothers and single fathers are eligible to join the Project, but not inexplicably very few fathers have been attracted, and therefore only the mothers have been included in the evaluation of the programme services.

The Project is directed towards single parent families in the belief that this unit is particularly "at risk" because of the necessity for one person to sustain all the pressures, responsibilities, instrumental and affective tasks which are usually borne by two adults. In this situation the normal and quite considerable stresses of parenthood, (White, 1976) are exacerbated, and there is much less relief from the strain.

Single parents are frequently more isolated than other family groups and yet they are conspicuous and their child rearing habits often under critical public scrutiny (The Finer Report, 1974). They lack the support and encouragement that may be provided by a spouse and may also, therefore, lack confidence in the child rearing approaches they adopt (Marsden, 1969). In addition they may suffer the consequences of the circumstances which led to their single parent status — such things as lack of confidence in self, insecure children, and community stereotyping of their position (Bernstein, 1971).

Rationale

The Project is based upon the following underlying assumptions:

- The pre-school years are of critical importance to the future development of a child, the child rearing practices adopted by the primary caretaker (usually the mother) having a major influence. This period can also be particularly stressful for the mother (White, 1976).
- The parent who is the primary caretaker, is the most permanent influential force in a child's life and should always be used as the primary change agent in the relationship. (Bronfenbrenner,



1974). Parents are the greatest single influence on a child's self concept and language development (Levenstein, 1970).

- Many parents are inadequately prepared for parenthood. Pre-parent classes in high schools are a relatively recent innovation and it can be argued that motivation for this type of learning is low during adolescence (Report of the Commission on Human Relationships, 1978, Vol. 2). Experience of one's own family and childhood is often the only preparation for parenthood received. This can result in the re-application of ineffective child caring methods.
- Ignorance about human development and unrealistic expectations of children are important stress factors (Lopata, 1971). In a single parent situation they are often cumulative with other stresses such as financial and housing difficulties, lack of opportunity for relaxation or stimulation outside the home, loneliness, and the normal pressures and demands of children. Caring for young children in itself can be considered a chronic stress (Gavron, 1966). The stress created by rigid or unrealistic expectations, and by lack of knowledge of milestones of development, can be reduced by an effective parent education programme (Strom & Slaughter, 1976).
- The emotional well-being of parent and child are mutually dependent, so the needs of both must be considered (Bowlby, 1953).
- The socio-economic circumstances of a family influence the degree of motivation, energy and resources they will be able to contribute to the development of their children. It may be necessary to alleviate their living conditions or deal with practical and personal problems before they can benefit from the education programme (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Badger, 1971). 'In preventive work for children the need to see parents as adult persons with developmental needs of their own should receive much more attention' (Kensington Centre Report, 1975).
- Helping parents to achieve a more positive attitude about their role as educators, or as the child's first teacher, can increase their self-esteem and confidence; give

a sense of purpose and of personal power; and help in the development of environmental mastery (Gilmer, 1970; Gordon, 1971; Karnes, 1970; Lillie, 1975; Badger, 1971). Self-confidence and positive motivation are important pre-requisites for gaining knowledge and skills, and may generalise to other areas of life.

- A programme which provides parent education, emotional support and various types of practical assistance to single parent families is likely to promote the stability and adequacy of the parent-child relationship.



PEAP Programme

The major programme elements of the Parent Education and Assistance Project consist of (a) support, and (b) parent education. The supportive services include various forms of practical assistance to the parents, as well as opportunities for maximising parent self-development. The education component is a constant factor underlying all supportive services as it is an important means of increasing the parents' self-confidence and self-respect. The Manual entitled **Children and Child Rearing** (Constable et al, 1977), which was developed by the Project, forms the basis for the education programme.

Staff.

The staff operating from the Project Centre consist of a Social Worker, a Child Care Nurse, a Secretary and ten trained part-time paraprofessional home visitors. The major research activities of the Project are conducted by a separate research team based at the University of Western Australia, consisting of an Evaluation Director, one full-time and two part-time research assistants.



Project Services

Home Visiting Service:

The ten home visitors provide both a supportive service and the education programme to one group of parents in their homes. (Group E¹). Information and advice about personal, as well as child rearing problems are offered. Many parents appear to need attention to their own needs before they are willing to concentrate on their children's needs. The home visitor endeavours to develop a planned programme for each family, alerting the mother to each stage of development in the child, suggesting appropriate play activities and materials, discussing the problems common in each stage, and focusing the parent's attention on appropriate safety precautions. It is also the intention of the home visitor to model interactions with the child.

Drop-in Centre:

All parents involved in the Parent Education and Assistance Project in Fremantle can use the facilities of the Drop-in Centre. (Groups E¹ and E²).

(a) Occasional Child Care

An Occasional Child Care facility has been established within the Drop-in Centre so that parents can have a break from their children for several hours at a time.

(b) Toy Lending

A Toy Lending Library provides the books, toys and materials needed as a back-up to the education programme. Parents may borrow the toys for a small fee and in addition the home visitors utilize them to demonstrate various parent-child interactions. Parents are also encouraged to make their own toys.

(c) Individual Assistance

Individualised information, advice and counselling is available both in the area of personal problems, and in the area of child management and behaviour problems. Basic information about the child's development is obtained through the initial research data collection, and this is used as a source of reassurance and support for the parents, as well as being the basis for future assistance. The progress of the children is monitored continuously to provide direction and feedback to both project staff and parents.

(d) Parent Education

Educational activities are encouraged within the Centre. There is a regular film day on which films about child development, and other educational topics are shown. Group discussions about child rearing problems such as handling aggression, toilet training, negativism etc; and the opportunity for staff to model behaviour towards the children are all part of the daily scene. Education is not always restricted to child development, but spans areas such as familiarisation with community resources, current affairs, and the development of other skills and resources.

(e) Play Centre

A playgroup type of environment is provided within the play centre where children can gain the experience of mixing in a group and various other social skills. Parents, who are voluntarily rostered to assist in the Centre, also have the opportunity to relate to other children and can develop a more realistic gauge of their own children's progress.

(f) Recreational Activities

Within the Centre, parents have the opportunity to develop a

variety of homemaking, recreational or handicraft skills such as dressmaking, pottery, toymaking, tennis and cooking. Skill sharing groups are encouraged so that parents have the opportunity to try out an activity, and the Centre thereby operates as a launching pad for involvement in community activities such as adult education. It is intended that the Centre provide the parents with a link to the wider community and a referral point for any of their needs.

(g) Support System

Social contact with other single parents with similar aged children is expected to create wider perspectives, new ideas, a sense of participation, enthusiasm, and to reinforce learning. Already there is evidence that parents are forming their own supportive network, which will help to sustain them through periods of stress, break down their isolation, and create their own 'caring' structure. All self-help projects such as babysitting co-operatives and the establishment of a handicrafts stall are being actively promoted.



Evaluation

Systematic evaluation and research, as an integral part of social action programmes, is a relatively recent phenomenon in Australia. An essential component of PEAP is the evaluation of the effectiveness of the home visit and Centre based services. Thus, we are seeking to answer such questions as: To what extent does the programme work? What differences are there between the effectiveness of the home visiting services and the services provided at the Centre?

Klineberg (1955) points out that traditional evaluation of social service programmes has usually been presented in the form of narrative reports. He claims that these reports are frequently fragmentary and subjective. He stresses that "they fail to carry conviction precisely because we can never be sure whether another observer looking at the same project might not have come to an entirely different conclusion" (p. 347). Jahoda and Barnitz (1955) also call for the need for more systematic and less subjective methods of evaluating the results of social welfare programmes.

Evaluation has usually been defined in terms of "an effort to learn what changes take place during and after an action programme, and what part of these changes can be attributed to the programme." (Jahoda and Barnitz, 1955). Essentially evaluation is seen as testing the specific objectives of a programme and the central aim of action programmes is to bring about change in the lives of the people receiving the intervention. Without denying the need to test programme objectives, Stogren (1970) maintains that evaluation should be concerned also with outcomes other than specified objectives, that is with unanticipated consequences. In addition, he stresses the need to study inputs or antecedent conditions and the processes of a programme.

Accountability and decision making are two important products of evaluation research. The seventies has seen a new and growing demand for the users of public funds to be held accountable for those funds. Systematic evaluation of government funded projects such as this one, is one answer to the accountability question.

The outcomes and findings of evaluation, should be the basis for decision making. Evaluation research of social action projects, such as PEAP should lead to an improvement of programmes and services to families.

To summarize, PEAP is being evaluated in an attempt:

1. To determine the effectiveness of the programme as a whole;
2. to develop a greater understanding of single mothers and their children, and,
3. to develop a greater understanding of the needs of these families.



Specific objectives and other outcomes

A number of objectives form the basic structure of this evaluation research (Drake-Brockman & Constable, 1976).

It is anticipated that families receiving both levels of service, the Centre and the home based, will show differences in their development from families only receiving the Centre based services.

— As a result of participation in the Project parents will feel more positive about their children.

— As a result of participation in the project parents will develop more "self-help skills" and independence: making toys, using other community resources, initiation of projects; identification of own problems and seeking appropriate assistance.

— As a result of participation in the project parents will acquire more knowledge about the processes of children's physical, intellectual, social and emotional development, and the reasons for their behaviour.

— As a result of participation in the project the parents will become better equipped to be their children's first "teacher".

— As a result of participation in the project the parents will develop more varied and more stimulating methods of interacting with and relating to their children.

— As a result of participation in the project parents will demonstrate a positive change in their ability to cope with the stress created by children.

— Parent participation in the activities of the Centre will be encouraged and evaluated.

— A group of mothers from two-parent families will be compared with single mothers.

— As a result of their parents' participation in the project the children under the age of four will make greater gains in their over-all social, emotional, intellectual and motor development than their counterparts in the control group. There may be similar gains in the development of older siblings.

As well as testing specific objectives this evaluation is designed to gather information in three other areas:

Firstly, we are interested in examining the inputs or antecedent conditions. In essence, we are concerned with an examination of the characteristics of the families in the Project before intervention. For instance, data have been gathered on the educational, marital, and health background of mothers, as well as their attitudes to child rearing.

Secondly, we are monitoring the processes of the intervention. That is, we are keeping a careful record and description of what is occurring during the life of the programme. This monitoring of processes is being carried out through progress reports, weekly home visit reports, daily records of the use of the services at the Centre, systematic observation of the behaviour of the participants, and ratings of the project by the participants.

And third, we are concerned with the measurement of outcomes other than those found in the testing of the project objectives. As Stogren (1970) points out "programmes have many positive and negative outcomes that are not stated objectives, but which should be con-

sidered in evaluating the programmes." For example, we are interested in closely examining the characteristics of those mothers in whom we gauge the most positive change. Here we will be asking the question: What is it about these particular mothers that makes them different from those who showed little or no change? This type of analysis of outcomes should give a deeper insight into the effectiveness of the Project.



Design of the Evaluation

Three groups of one parent families and their children are being studied: two intervention groups and one comparison group. In addition a fourth group of mothers from two parent families, comprise a second comparison group.

The first intervention group (Group E₁), receive all the services of the Project, namely home visiting and the services of the Centre. The second intervention group (Group E₂), receive only the services of the Centre.

The first comparison group (Group C₁), receive no services. Major problems arose in the designation of a comparison group of single mothers. If all families had been recruited from the same geographical area, then we would have faced the problem of assigning families to the comparison group, and thus refusing them the services of the Project. In action research there is always the ethical issue of providing services to some people and refusing the same services to others, if one wishes to have a comparison or control group of subjects. In the present project the problem of assignment to a comparison group was magnified because many

families live in State Housing Commission flats. Thus, if all families were recruited from the same geographical area then it was highly probable that we would meet the situation where families in intervention and comparison groups would know each other. Thus, the problem of "contamination" of such a comparison group was a possibility. Another problem was that the number of available families in the area of the Project services was not sufficient to recruit the proposed 150 families for the three groups of single mothers and their families. When all these difficulties were taken into account it was decided to recruit a comparison group of single mothers in another geographically separate, but hopefully comparable, suburban area of Perth.

The second comparison group (Group C₂), comprises low-income mothers and children from two parent families. It is felt that more worthwhile and forceful conclusions will be able to be drawn about the single mothers if we compare them with married mothers. These families are recruited from the same area as those in the two intervention groups (Group E₁ and E₂).



Referral and Recruitment

Most families (63%) were referred by the Officer in charge of Monetary Assistance at the local district office of the Western Australian Department for Community Welfare. In order to protect the anonymity of the family, the first step in the recruitment process was for the Department of Community Welfare Officer to send a letter to each eligible mother (i.e., a single mother who has at least one child under 4 years of age). This letter briefly outlined the aims of the project and mothers were requested

to contact the Officer whose signature appeared on the letter, if they did not wish to be part of the project. After a period of 2 weeks had elapsed from the time these letters were mailed, the remaining names were released to the evaluation staff.

A smaller number (31%) of families were referred by social welfare agencies, mothers already participating in the project, or by self-referral, i.e., mothers who heard or read about the Project. For the recruitment of the married mothers we relied on the assistance of the Child Health Clinic sisters who referred mothers to the project.

A visit was then made to each home. The purpose of this visit was to explain the project in more detail, and, if the mother was interested in participating, the initial interview and testing was carried out. Usually two visits to the home were required to complete the recruitment process.

All the families in Group C₁ were recruited in the above manner. Mothers in this group were invited to participate in a University project concerned with single mothers and their children. If they expressed interest, interview and test procedures were administered. In the recruitment of the comparison groups we relied on those families who were willing to take part, rather than being able to carefully match families with those in the intervention groups.

Following recruitment, families were assigned to one of the intervention groups. Assignment was based on a matching process. The variables taken into account in the matching process were: type of single motherhood (unmarried, separated, divorced); sex and age of the youngest child, age of mother and number of children in the family. These factors were included in the matching procedure because they are important in terms of the projected outcomes.

Table I shows the major characteristics of each group based on the matching procedure.

VARIABLES	E ₁	E ₂	C ₁	ALL GROUPS
Mother's age on entry to project				
Mean (in years)	24.21	23.05	25.60	24.38
Range	17-36	16-38	17-36	16-38
N	43	38	48	129
Number of children in each family				
Mean	1.72	1.50	2.25	1.85
Range	1-7	1-4	1-5	1-6
Total N of children	73	55	108	236
Age of target child				
Mean (in months)	18.86	20.92	19.87	19.82
Range	1-45	1-47	1-42	1-47
N	43	37	47	127
Percentage of female target children				
%	34.9	44.7	39.6	39.5
N	15	17	19	51
Percentage of male target children				
%	65.1	55.3	60.4	60.5
N	28	21	29	78
Marital status of mother on entry to the project				
Never married	48.8% (21)	47.4% (18)	22.9% (11)	38.8% (50)
Separated	37.2% (16)	36.8% (14)	70.8% (34)	49.6% (64)
Divorced	11.6% (5)	15.8% (6)	6.3% (3)	10.9% (14)
Defacto	2.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.8% (1)
N	43	38	48	129

TABLE I Major variables, in order of importance, used in assigning families to Groups E₁ and E₂.

These results show that the assignment of families to the two intervention groups was quite successful for mother's age, number of children in each family, age of target child, and marital status on entry to the project. Only on the variable of sex of target child is there a discrepancy between the two groups.

With the control group (Group C₁), where there was no opportunity

to match families with those in the intervention groups, the results for age of mother, and age of target child are similar in all three groups. However, discrepancies are evident for the variables, number of children in each family, sex of target child, and marital status of mother. The mothers in the control group are slightly older, have larger families and are more likely to have been married.



Data Collection

Data are collected on three occasions: at the time of recruitment, after nine months of intervention, and after eighteen months of intervention.

A wide range of data are being collected on both mothers and children. Background information about mothers and children is gained through interviews with the mother. In addition, tests of mothers' attitudes (Constable et al 1978, Strom, 1976), knowledge of child development (Constable et al. 1978) and a measure of the home environment (Caldwell, 1965) are administered. The Denver Developmental test (Frankenburg et al. 1970), the Preschool Attainment Record (Doll, 1966) and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary test (Dunn, 1965), are administered to the children.

Approximately 45 of the families are being studied through the systematic observation of mothers and target children in their homes. In addition, the process of the intervention is being monitored through homemakers' reports and careful documentation of use of the Centre's facilities.



Conclusion

The Parent Education and Assistance Project fuses knowledge from social welfare research with that from pre-school intervention programmes to produce a unique blend of services which aim to strengthen and support one parent families with pre-school children. It

is anticipated that the experience and knowledge gained through an extensive evaluation of the Project should indicate new directions for the provision of preventive services to vulnerable parent/child relationships. A final comprehensive report covering the entire development of the Project and the evaluation conclusions, will be completed at the termination of the Project's pilot period in May, 1979.



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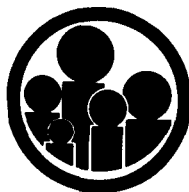
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