

Assessing the Effectiveness of a Family Life Education Program

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... it appears that a family life education program can bring about lasting attitudinal change. However, the attitudes that were changed were those based on either misinformation or general misconceptions about all aged people.

As people age, they may face various crises, such as: loss of a spouse, failing health and loss of income. When such crises occur, more demands and expectations are placed upon their children.¹ Family support and involvement, therefore, is an essential factor in maintaining elderly people as productive and functional members of the community. The attitude of the child toward aging appears to be a chief factor in influencing the aging parent-adult child relationship. A number of investigators postulate that attitudes learned during one's formative years may affect how a person will interact with aged as adults.²

Only a few researchers have touched upon intervention strategies to improve these relationships. Johnson and Brusck suggested from their study that structured interviews may be a first step for some families to think about the

quality of their relationship.³ Simos⁴ proposed that counseling must include aged family members and that family life education programs should be developed around problems associated with aging.

This article assesses the effect of an educational family life education series on changing an adult child's attitudes toward his aged parent.

Program Design

The program was designed for adult children of aged parents through a grant from the Baltimore City Commission on Aging and Retirement Education. The authors designed a pilot project which presented the participants with relevant information on aging and social services supports available.

The family life education series consisted of six consecutive weekly evening sessions, each lasting two hours. The programs were held at the Jewish Community Center, a recreational and educational setting. It was felt that some individuals would be uncomfortable attending a program in a primary casework or treatment focus agency. The program format was flexible and concentrated on participant concerns noted on a survey administered prior

¹ Bertha Simos, "Adult Children and Their Aging Parents," *Social Work*, 1973, V. 18, pp. 78-85; M.B. Sussman and L. Burchinal, "Kin Family Network: Unheralded Structure in Current Conceptualizations of Family Functioning," *Marriage and Family Living*, 1962, V. 24, pp. 231-40; L.E. Troll, "The Family of Later Life: A Decade Review," *Marriage and Family Living*, 1971, V. 33, pp. 263-290.

² T. Hickey and R.A. Kalish, "Young People's Perceptions of Adults," *Journal of Gerontology*, 1968, V. 23, pp. 215-219; R. Kastenbaum and N. Durkee, "Young People View Old Age," in I.R. Kastenbaum, ed., *New Thoughts on Old Age*. Springer, New York, 1964.

³ Elizabeth Johnson and Barbara Bursk, "Relationship Between the Elderly and Their Adult Children," *The Gerontologist*, 1977, Vol. 17, Number 1, pp. 90-96.

⁴ Simos, *op. cit.*

to the first session. Emphasis was placed on modifying attitudes that were based upon lack of knowledge or misinformation. Formal presentations by authorities in the field of aging concentrated in the following six areas: parental and child expectations and how such expectations may influence a relationship; the physical, social and psychological changes that occur with age; a historical overview of the events that influenced their parents; techniques to improve communication between generations; community resources available for their aged parent and/or the adult child; and the role and importance of the family to the aged parent.

Each session was limited to two hours. One hour formal presentations were interlaced with audio-visual aids. The remaining time was devoted to small group discussion. Participants were assigned to a specific group for the entire six weeks. Social workers were provided by the Jewish Family and Children's Service to serve as discussion leaders. The social worker was present to serve as a discussion leader and to serve as a link from one session to the next.

A questionnaire which included 37 various items was developed to assess the respondents' feelings and perceptions about his parent's behavior, personality, physical appearance, and their relationship. Several statements were adopted and modified from the Tuckman Lorge Old Persons Scale and ATOP Scale developed by Nathan Kogan. Other items were devised based on the authors' experience with adult children and aged parents. Statements expressed either positive or negative sentiment toward their aged parent. For each statement the participants indicated their reaction by marking the appropriate response on a five point Likert Scale that ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Information was obtained over a 6-month period at three specific time intervals. The questionnaire was administered prior to the family life education program, immediately following the program, and six months after the completion of the programs.

In order to ascertain if the study sample was

a representative one, the instrument was administered to 19 non-participants. The non-participant respondents were selected by a random sampling of a list of adult children of aged Center members.

Sample Population

The 48 people who attended the program were a self-selected group, interested in learning about aging and its relation to their family situation. All those who registered for the program did so in response to advertisements in local papers, public service announcements on radio, and distribution of flyers explaining the program's content.

The sample consisted of 37 people, since eleven individuals who attended the program declined to participate in the study. After the completion of the program, eight of these 37 people decided to continue in a group counseling experience offered by the Jewish Family Children's Service. Most of the subjects were Jewish, in good health, married, and upwardly mobile, as reflected in their educational attainment and their economic status. By contrast, their parents had limited educational experiences and diminished financial resources, were widowed and in fair-to-poor health. Most of the adult children appear to have a cordial relationship with their parents and claimed to visit them on a frequent basis. The children's major concerns revolved around their parents' physical and mental health, or their parents' relationship with various family members. Only a few subjects cited their parents' living conditions or economic situation as of prime concern.

Findings

It was also found that all 37 people felt that their aged relative, regardless of the aged person's income, health, or living arrangement, worried about unimportant things. At the conclusion of their participation in the program, the number who so felt declined to 18. Interestingly, of the eight people who subsequently went on for counseling, two continued to feel their aged parents worried

about unimportant things. After counseling, all eight people disagreed with this statement.

Table I

Statement: This older person often worries about unimportant things.

	Participants	Participants who continued in group counseling	Non-Participants
T1	4.38	4.25	3.63
T2	3.15	2.62	—
T3	3.04	2.00	3.63

T1 refers to administration of the questionnaire prior to the implementation of the Family Life Education Program. T2 refers to the questionnaire's implementation immediately following the program, and T3 refers to its administration six months after the completion of the program. The computations on the table are arithmetic mean scores. A score of 5.00 indicates a response of strongly agree, a score of 3.00 indicates a response of undecided, and a response of 1.00 indicates strong disagreement.

The table above indicates the changes in participants' responses. Changes were apparently due to new knowledge of aged people and a more sympathetic attitude toward their aged parent that this new knowledge may have

facilitated. For those people who subsequently went on for counseling, the changes were significant enough to bring people from initial agreement to subsequent disagreement.

Table II

Statement: This person is set in his ways and is unable to change.

	Participants	Participants who continued in group counseling	Non-Participants
T1	3.81	4.25	3.63
T2	2.87	2.50	—
T3	2.78	2.00	3.68

In the authors' experience, a common attitude is that aged people are set in their ways and unable to change. Simos writes of a study of 50 Jewish-American adult children which found that 39 of those people considered their parents' stubbornness a major problem.⁵ Of the 37 people who participated in our own study, 28 felt that their parents were set in their ways. The program content sought to explain the various physical and psychological changes

⁵ *Idem.*

that occur with age. Emphasis was placed on the concept that changes in behavior can occur throughout one's life and that old age was no exception. At the completion of the program, only 12 people felt that their aged parent was unable to change. It appeared that participation in the family life education program significantly altered attitudes about the rigidity of the person they were concerned about. Dramatic changes occurred with those people who subsequently went on for counseling.

Table III*Statement:* When this person asks me to do something and I do not want to do it, I feel guilty.

	Participants	Participants who continued in group counseling	Non-Participants
T1	4.27	4.25	3.63
T2	3.15	2.62	—
T3	3.04	2.00	3.63

Jane Otten and Florence Shelly write that in a relationship between a parent and child, guilt feelings are inevitable.⁶ The authors, in designing the family life education program, incorporated this belief into the educational format. To assess the effect of educational information and guilt feelings, participants were asked, "When this person asks me to do something and I do not want to do it, I feel guilty." Twenty-eight of the people agreed with this statement. Also, 7 of the 8 people who went on for group counseling agreed. The family life education program did not dwell on individual relationship; however, it stressed that most people have such feelings, and if such feelings are not extreme, they are not unusual. At the completion of the program 23 people indicated they still felt guilty. The impact of the family life education program in this area was not dramatic; however, it was found that the 8 people who went on for counseling had a greater intensity of guilt feelings than those who did not and significant changes did occur for those people who

continued in group counseling; their average score declined from 4.25 to 2.00. It is also important to point out that although people who went on for counseling had more intense guilt feelings than those who did not, they were also less inclined to agree with the statement that their parents made excessive demands on them. Perhaps those people with greater guilt feelings also may have felt a greater obligation toward their aged parent.

Based on the information obtained, it appears that a family life education program can bring about lasting change in attitudes that are based on either misinformation or general misconceptions about all aged people. The program did not appear to be successful in changing attitudes that may be indicative of, or formulated by, the relationship between an adult and his/her aged parent. There were several statements made to the participants to assess the quality of their relationship. The tables below reflect the participants' responses to these statements.

Table IV*Statement:* I feel ill at ease with him.

	Participants	Participants who continued group counseling	Non-Participants
T1	2.37	3.25	2.26
T2	2.40	2.87	—
T3	2.56	2.42	3.36

⁶ Jane Otten and Florence Shelly, *When Your Parents Grow Old*. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1976).

Table V*Statement:* Regardless of the love and affection I give this person, he feels that I neglect him.

	Participants	Participants who continued in group counseling	Non-Participants
T1	2.84	3.25	3.05
T2	2.78	3.00	—
T3	2.95	2.62	3.10

Table VI*Statement:* This person never considers that I have my own life to lead.

	Participants	Participants who continued in group counseling	Non-Participants
T1	2.93	2.87	2.94
T2	2.62	2.87	—
T3	2.82	2.50	2.88

It is important to point out that most of the participants had a positive attitude about the relationship with their aged parent. Only slight attitudinal changes were made. Six months after the completion of the program, regression to formerly held attitudes occurred. A greater degree of change occurred with those people who continued in group counseling. The responses of people who went on for counseling may indicate that they initially had greater difficulty in their relationship with an aged parent than those who did not. The educational component brought about some minor changes in this area. However, after counseling, the responses went through a complete reversal. Those who completed counseling responded more positively than those who did not have counseling.

Conclusion

The participants in the program indicated that they felt it was a valuable experience. Twenty-four participants indicated that the program was *very* helpful and thirteen participants indicated that the family life education

program was *somewhat* helpful in improving the relationship with their aged parent.

It is our opinion that a family life education program, similar to the one implemented at the Baltimore Jewish Community Center, would be effective in changing those attitudes which are based upon misinformation. It would be less effective in improving the relationship between an adult child and his/her aged parent. Obviously, the factors which influence this relationship are determined by the individual needs, personalities and situations that affect the relationship between people. This program indicated that counseling was a successful intervention technique in assessing and dealing with these factors. Counseling, as compared to the educational and discussion component of the program, was substantially more successful in influencing the relationship between an adult and his aged parent. In designing such a program, this option should be made available to the participants. The authors attempted to build into the program a natural and logical transition from a community center to an

agency better equipped to provide service in the area of personal concerns. To facilitate this transition, the Jewish Family and Children's Service furnished discussion group leaders. The familiarity with JFCS worker and the common bonds that developed among the participants made it easier for people to continue with counseling at JFCS.

The authors were also concerned about the lasting effect of a six-week informational type program. As the results indicate, when statements about aged parents were re-administered six months after the completion of the program, in the areas in which improvement occurred, regression to previously held attitudes did not substantially occur.

Prior to the program, it was expected that the program would attract adult children who had experienced difficulty in relating to their aged relatives. However, the initial responses of the non-participants compared to people who participated were not dramatically different.

Additional References

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