ASSESSMENT OF PARENTING NEWSLETTERS

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This research project is dedicated to my husband. Jack, thank you for giving me the encouragement I so desperately needed to complete this program. Thank you too for embarking on the befuddling journey of parenthood with me!

I am indebted to Dr. Patricia Shields for holding the flashlight--and my hand-- whilst I stumbled toward the light at the end of the tunnel.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Introduction and Statement of Research Purpose

In the fall of 1998 a seemingly innocuous book written by a non-credentialed author, entitled *The Nurture Assumption*, arrived in bookstores. Quickly, the contents of the book landed the author in a hotbed of controversy. Judith Rich Harris, author of *The Nurture Assumption* contends that parents have almost no lasting influence on their children. Her assertion goes against what many in the child development field have whole-heartedly supported for more than 25 years. And yet, the book has received the attention and support of some credible professionals in the field of child development psychology.

The book may have lasting consequences on the type of information disseminated to parents and subsequently how people view their roles as parents. The book disputes, using a plethora of child development studies, the truism that parents have a lasting and profound impact on their children's personality. The foundation of parenting education relies in large part on child development studies. Thus, information provided to parents could be challenged if Harris' argument is accepted by social scientists.

Much of the beliefs of child psychology are influenced by results of studies and discoveries in the field. Therefore, information gleaned from the field of child psychology information changes as new studies replace older studies. This can be disconcerting to child development specialists and even bewildering to parents.[1] However, parents also receive information that is considered solid and unchanging.[2] Parents rely on accurate parenting information from a variety of sources. One source, which is the centerpiece of this research, is parenting newsletters.[3] Parenting newsletters are timely communication devices typically distributed to new parents upon

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[1] E.g., whereas 50 years ago babies and toddlers were left in their cribs for hours on end to entertain themselves, this type of confinement is currently viewed as child neglect.

[2] E.g., developmental growth stages, bathing and holding techniques, immunizations, resources.

[3] This particular research began primarily because the author observed in herself and within her peer group a great need for pragmatic and basic parenting advice.

the birth of their child and continue on a monthly basis through the child's third birthday. These parenting newsletters are typically funded and distributed by a government entity. One may not think of the government as the entity to turn to for such advice. However, all levels of government at some point become involved in child rearing. Public hospitals, social workers, public school and protective services are all concerned with the welfare of children. Therefore, it should not seem strange that government, particularly on the state and local levels, also provide parents with educational tools to raise their children.

If the assertions discussed in *The Nurture Assumption* drastically change the way academicians think about the parent-child relationship, then parenting newsletters will certainly be impacted. Some newsletters may eventually lose their support base.

This applied research project begins with a review of the literature on parenting education. The literature review explains parenting education—its roots, current value and the available parenting support systems. The last section of the literature review focuses on parenting newsletters. The remaining chapters draw from the literature review to assess the following twofold research purpose.

1. Assess other parenting newsletters nationwide using the practical ideal type developed from the literature.

2. Assess the *Texas Tots* newsletter and compare it to the practical ideal type and other parenting newsletters.

Report Structure and Chapter Summaries

The project begins with a general overview of the paper and research purpose. The second chapter provides a compilation of the literature on parenting education. The literature review is divided into three general segments: historical picture of parenting education; parenting support structures in general; and parenting newsletters as a specific part of those support structures. The chapter also details the conceptual framework of the project. In Chapter 3 the research methodologies (content analysis and survey research) used to analyze the newsletters are discussed. In addition the conceptual framework is operationalized. Chapter 4 gives the results of the surveys and

content analysis using tables and narratives. This chapter also compares the newsletters to the practical ideal type. The final chapter summarizes the results and draws general conclusions about the current status and future prospects for parenting newsletters.

Chapter II. Literature Review

Introduction and Purpose

The purpose of the literature review chapter is to discover the essential components of a parenting newsletter so that a practical ideal type can be developed. In order to fulfill this purpose, one must acquire a greater understanding of the evolution of parenting education and its current social value. Parenting education is effective in the fight against child abuse and promotes raising children with normal development. Parenting education is also the recent target (although indirectly so) of a new premise that parents' conduct toward their children may not matter at all. A discussion of the historical roots of child development psychology and its relevance to parent education principles may bring about a greater understanding of the purpose and value of parenting newsletters.

Historical Events in Child Development

Harris' book, *The Nurture Assumption*, appears to be lashing out at the extremists in the field of child development who have made some parents feel as though any and everything they do will be to the credit or the detriment of their offspring. In fact, much of what Harris describes, has already been discussed decades and even centuries before.

Until the 17th century, the concept of childhood was non-existent. Except for the infants and toddlers, who were treated differently due to their dependence on adults for food and shelter, young children were expected to work and socialize in the company of adults. Children were not spared the indiscretions of adulthood such as violence and sex. Apparently, the change toward child rearing came about by the religious

zealousness of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, when moralists began to try and preserve the innocence in children. "Gradually these thinkers influenced parents and a whole new family attitude, oriented around the child and his education, appeared" (Mussen et. al., 1974: 5).

British philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), asserted that the infant's mind was a "tabula-rasa—a blank slate—and he is therefore receptive to all kinds of learning" (Mussen, 1974: 7). Locke believed in man as a rational being who needed to impose self-control and self-denial. Parents were responsible for teaching children how to become such austere beings from infancy (Mussen et. al., 1974: 7).

On the other end of the philosophical spectrum was French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78). Rousseau believed that children were born with an inherent moral sense. Rousseau thought that children were active participants, whereby they embrace problem-solving through play. "Knowledge is not an invention of adults poured into willing or unwilling vessels; it is a joint construction of the child in nature and the natural world" (Mussen et. al., 1974: 7).
Rousseau believed that parents were ineffective and even harmful for the child's development as is indicated by the following passage.

> Rousseau suggests that no great harm to the child or to society will result if the child grows with little adult supervision and direction! The child will become increasingly fit to live in the world, not by virtue of ceaseless vigilance on the part of his governors, but because nature has endowed him with an order of development that ensures his healthy growth. More than that, the typical interventions of parents and teachers mar and distort the natural succession of the changes of childhood; the child that man raises is almost certain to be inferior to the child that nature raises (Mussen, 1974: 7).

Harris purports similar thoughts in the 20th century vernacular.

> I no longer believe that this early learning, which in our society generally takes place within the home, sets the pattern for what is to follow. Although the learning itself serves a purpose, the content of what children learn may be irrelevant to the world outside their home. They may cast it off when they step outside as easily as the dorky sweater their mother made them wear (Harris, 1998: 13).

However interesting were Locke and Rousseau perspectives, their philosophies were untested and hypothetical. Evolutionist Charles Darwin, who wrote "On the Origin of Species" (1859), is credited with influencing the establishment of child psychology. "The notion of the evolution of the species—and especially Darwin's continued search for 'signs of man in animal life,' led to speculation about the development of man and society" (Mussen et. al., 1974: 9).

Harris asserts that theorist and psychologist Sigmund Freud is the father of the nurture assumption. Freud argued that parents cause "...untold anguish in the young child, simply by being there. The anguish is unavoidable and universal; even the most conscientious parents cannot prevent it, thought they can easily make it worse" (Harris, 1998: 5). Freud maintained that the infant and young child was helpless to control his environment. He believed that the child was up against biological forces (he called it instinctual energy) and social experiences, (family life). "All children, Freud believed, develop sexual and hostile feelings toward their parents which lead to conflict, anxiety, and, in some, to neurosis" (Mussen et. al., 1974: 42). Darwin and Freud, although not child development psychologists, purported an antagonistic relationship between the child and his self (nature) and his environment (nurture). Today's field of child development traces its intellectual origin to these men.

As with the many social sciences issues, child development theory is not immune from extreme vacillations that often occur coincidentally. The science of child development relies on both the 'hard and soft' sciences because both the genetic (hard) and environment (soft) appear to play an equal and inseparable role. There does not appear to be dispute among child development specialists that nature and nurture are both responsible for a child's make-up. Mussen et. al discuss nature and nurture and classify what constitutes both into five categories.

1. Genetically determined biological variables *nature*
2. Non-genetic biological variables (e.g. lack of oxygen during the birth process, malfunctioning of the pituitary gland) *nature*
3. The child's past learning *nurture*
4. The child's immediate social physiological environment (parents, siblings, peers, and teachers) *nurture*

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5. The general social and cultural milieu in which the child develops
    nurture (Mussen et. al, 1974: 74)

Harris also acknowledges that environment and genetics both play indispensable roles in the development of children. She argues that those in the child development field consider parental nurturing as the exclusive environmental factor and blindly renounce other environmental influences such as the influence of peers. Harris argues that peers are the most influential environmental factor to a child's personality and that parents have scant long-lasting influence. Harris argues that the importance of parental influence is only a myth, a product of western culture. (Harris, 1998: 2-5).

Alfred Adler (1870-1937), is considered the father of parenting education. Learned in both the hard and soft sciences, Adler was a physician and psychologist. He understood the roles of nature and nurture. Adler believed that a strong community (environmental factor) could help all people realize their full potential. "Adler's dream was to generate a true community of committed parents, teachers, and others adults who would work together to foster courage and social responsibility in children and youth" (Terner & Pew, 1978). Adler began his work in Vienna, Austria. His participatory philosophy engendered enthusiasm among parents and teachers. Associations sprang up to promote the growth of social responsibility. Those associations led to the development of child guidance centers where professionals and the general public alike were welcome to participate. "Adler believed that the goal of psychology, psychiatry, and guidance was to educate the whole community toward more effective social living" (Fine, 1980: 54). Obviously, Adler believed that the entire community (parents, peers, professionals) were important to nurturing children.

In describing the philosophies of these men throughout history, it is apparent that the nature/nurture relationship is not new. During the Rousseau and Adler periods, attention focused on nurture as a prominent factor in child development. During the Locke period nature was prominent. Darwin and Freud attributed child development and therefore mankind development to both forces. Although, with Freud, the child was destined to become marred by both his environment and his own biological forces. While Freud may have seemed quite pessimistic, the argument that many parents

probably do impose 'untold anguish' on their children is not an exaggeration. Parenting educators, however, may argue that for parents of newborns, anguish goes both ways. Parenting education in its many forms, is necessary to lessen the anguish of both parent and child.

The Link Between Child Development and Parenting Education

Parenting is a learned behavior. Parents may learn "how to parent" by listening and observing family members and friends, asking their physicians questions, reading parenting information, or simply by jumping in with both feet. Probably, each parent will have used all of these methods by the time their child is one month old. Nevertheless, many parents learn pretty quickly to perform basic parenting skills and begin to feel a certain sense of confidence in their new roles. Parenting newsletters help to establish a knowledge base for parents. Newsletters are not a forum for the ethereal debates about the psychological impact or repercussions on parenting approaches. Rather, through newsletters, educators relay basic, but non-instinctive, advice to parents.

When directly asked whether parenting newsletters achieve a useful purpose, Harris replied that they do provide a purpose.

> In traditional societies, people rear their children more or less in public, and women are surrounded by other women doing the same thing…But in modern, urbanized societies, women are often on their own—no sisters, close friends with young children. So they need some support, some information. It's reassuring to them…Parents can be helped—by books, newsletters, or training courses, to make things work better at home, make the child less troublesome and everybody happier (Chaney-Harris Interview, 1998).

However, Harris goes on to say that she does not believe that the information contained in the newsletter will improve the child's behavior or happiness outside the home (Chaney-Harris Interview, 1998).

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Those parents who seek basic, but non-instinctive advice, usually have those expectations met in their parenting newsletters.[4] The Texas parenting newsletter, *Texas Tots*, begins educating parents before their children are born. For example, the *Texas Tots* prenatal issue describes pragmatically the possible scenarios of the impending birth. Its article "How will your baby be born?" discusses the types of childbirths: natural, caesarean and anesthetic. It gives statistics on how many of these types of deliveries occur and what happens with each type. The same issue describes how the body prepares for impending labor (Texas Tots, Vol.1, No. 2). These articles are meant to inform the mother so that she can know what to expect, reducing her anxiety and fear.[5]

This type of basic prenatal advice is associated with the development of the baby. As Mussen et. al. points out, babies are influenced by their prenatal environment. Growth and development of the fetus is influenced by the mothers' physical, social, and psychological environment. Several of these environmental factors are: mother's age, diet, drug use (legal and illegal), diseases, Rh blood factors, and even the mother's emotional health and attitude. For example, if the mother is anxious about the impending delivery, the mother could experience a more difficult labor and delivery (Mussen et. al. 1974: 110).

The above example of the *Texas Tots* prenatal issue demonstrates how newsletters can relay information to increase knowledge so that the mother is less anxious and fearful prior to labor and delivery. Increased knowledge typically results in an increase in confidence. Both child development specialists and parenting educators strive to teach parents correct parenting skills so that the confidence in parents *is* the result of sound knowledge and not naïve ignorance. (High degrees of confidence can be the result of ignorance too.) The relationship between confidence and knowledge is important to parenting education. One only has to read an issue of a newsletter to

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[4] Evidence of parental satisfaction with newsletter advice will be discussed in the section on newsletter effectiveness.
[5] Observing from personal experience and from those experiences of close friends, many women feel inadequate if they must undergo a caesarean or medicated birth. These feelings can lessen the joy of giving birth. Prenatal education can combat those negative feelings.

new parents realize their own abilities to interact with their newborn (Cardone and Gilkerson, 1990: 128, 140).

FANA last 35-40 minutes and is usually conducted the second day after the baby's birth. Mother, father, baby and facilitator are present. The program is based on a model of parental competence whereby:

> The activities of [FANA] are used...to elicit and discuss parent perceptions of and observations about the infant's capabilities and to allow parents to recalibrate their initial perceptions [increase knowledge] of their infant based on their observations of the infant's behavior (Cardone and Gilkerson, 1990: 129).

The FANA evaluation has four essential components. The facilitator first reviews both the mother and baby's medical charts, then she has the parents describe the labor experience. Retelling the labor experience is important because it gives the parents a sense of ownership and authority as parents. The labor experience is uniquely owned by the parents and not the professionals. The facilitator then introduces the baby's abilities to the parents to challenge their own preconceived beliefs and behaviors. The last phase involves a discussion between the facilitator and the parents about the parents' initial impressions of their baby and their own parenting abilities (Cardone and Gilkerson, 1990: 130-31).

FANA provides both support and intervention for the early days of interaction between parents and child. If the parents are well adjusted to their role, the 40 minute session will usually act as a positive reinforcement tool. If, however, the parents have had a prior history in their own childhood or in losing a newborn, then the session can act as an intervention and completely change the parents perceived knowledge of their newborn. For example, a mother who has dealt with the trauma of losing a newborn, may treat her healthy newborn with the same over-protection as a sickly baby. This type of parenting example is based on ignorance toward raising a healthy baby. The child, otherwise healthy, could have a misconception about his own abilities (Cardone and Gilkerson, 1990: 135, 137).

How Knowledge and Confidence Can Reduce Negative Parenting Behavior

Some of the parenting newsletters primary goals are to reduce the instances of child abuse in the home by educating parents so that they may have realistic expectations toward their children[6]. The parents are the primary caregivers to a new life that is totally dependent on them for survival and growth. Parental knowledge and confidence can influence parental attitudes in child rearing. For example, the lack of parental knowledge can result in inappropriate expectations toward the child's abilities. Inappropriate expectations by the parents toward their children is usually the source of parental ignorance and can lead to a host of social problems including child abuse. "Parental expectations have a powerful impact on the cognitive and psychosocial development of children" (Edwards-Beckett, 1992: 355).

The Early Child Development Program Example

An example of educating parents so that they will re-adjust their attitudes (increase knowledge) toward their child is illustrated by the successful Early Child Development Program (ECDP). ECDP was developed by Dr. Henri Parens and began in 1970. The first step in the ECDP was to observe the mother-child relationship and the level of maternal interest in her child's development. If a problem was found (infant or child abuse) the program acted as an intervention and education program for mothers (Frank and Rowe, 1993: 177-79, 182). Education is effective at reducing child abuse because:

> abusing parents expect and demand a great deal from their infants and
> children. Not only is the demand for performance great but it is
> premature, clearly beyond the ability of the infant to comprehend what is
> wanted and to respond appropriately (Steele and Pollack, 1968: 95).

The ECDP focused on preventing or eliminating child abuse and provided parents with information in a group setting, which demonstrates appropriate behavior for an infant or toddler. Parens tested the effectiveness of ECDP using experimental and control groups. Both groups came to Parens' medical college twice weekly, where

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[6] The results of the surveys found both Texas and Wisconsin newsletters as having goals to reduce child abuse.

they were observed interacting with their babies. The experimental group consisted of mostly non-abusing mothers. One or two abusing mothers were included in each group so that they could benefit from teachings and discussions on normal parental coping behavior.

The discussions were cathartic for those in the experimental group. The mothers learned about the emotional and behavioral development of their children. Maternal confidence increased and the mothers became more empathetic toward their children. The children typically reciprocated in kind and the parent-child relationship became mutually enriching (Frank and Rowe, 1993: 189). The control group had the same mix of mothers but did not receive any parenting education. The abusing mothers showed a "diminished ability to respond appropriately to their rapprochement-age children's appeals for closeness and to their normal temper tantrums and aggression toward their mothers" (Frank and Rowe, 1993: 196).

Frank and Rowe studied the results of ECDP study and other early childhood programs in general and found that these types of programs have a positive impact on fostering parent-child relationships. Parents were able to re-adjust their expectations to fit their children's level of skills and abilities. Frank and Rowe recommended that these types of programs continue so a widespread population could receive information on healthy parenting. Frank and Rowe also asserted that professionals who work with families had a responsibility to receive training in child development areas in order to offer sound, intelligent advice to parents (Frank and Rowe, 1993: 177-79, 198).

Parenting newsletters, although a different format than Parens' ECDP, can also accomplish Frank and Rowe's recommendations. Although newsletter recipients are usually unable to gather in groups to discuss parenting questions, the information provided serves to re-adjust parental expectations. Each of the twelve issues of *Parenting the First Year*, published by Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service and used by several other states, educates readers on occurrences that typically make parents frustrated or angry and apt to lash out at their babies. For example, the first two issues discuss why a baby cries and what to do to comfort the baby and stop the crying. The remaining ten issues discuss different disciplining techniques appropriate for infants.

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parenting education, they often did not attend available programs. Margaret McKim cited four reasons why new parents failed to use child development workshops. First, the workshops were geared toward the care of older babies and toddlers. *Those who most often seek help are parents of one to three month old babies.* Second, parents felt inadequate in seeking non-medical advice. Third, the workshops were offered at times inconvenient for working parents and fourth parents simply did not give participation a high priority. The researchers for this particular study suggested developing television programs to supplement existing services (McKim, 1987: 25). Obviously, television programs can be conveniently watched at home and could be customized to the age of the baby.

Although the goal of some newsletters is to curb child abuse, the newsletters are not clear on why this is desirable—is it because the goal is to provide a healthy child or adult? On the surface it appears obvious that a society would not tolerate child abuse. However, Judith Rich Harris argues that the focus on child abuse is a new phenomenon and largely exclusive to western cultures. Moreover, she asserts that child abuse from the parents does not have lasting implications on the adult who was abused by his parents. Harris does not promote child abuse. In fact she concurs that it is abhorrent. And yet, Harris claims that those children who are abused are not marred for life by what went on in their childhood homes. The abused may not like their parents, but Harris argues that is the parent-child relationship that is marred and not the abused child. Conversely, Harris argues that if children are abused by their peers the effect can be life-lasting.

Harris describes a study conducted by sociologist Anne-Marie Ambert of York University in Canada to support her claim. Ambert's conclusions of a study conducted on students who were asked to write autobiographies on their pre-college life are as follows:

> There is far more negative treatment by peers than by parents in these autobiographies...This result, corroborated by other researchers, is startling considering the often single-minded focus of child-welfare professionals on parents while neglecting what is perhaps becoming the salient source of psychological misery among youth—peer conflict and mistreatment...(Harris, 1998: 316).

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Sound knowledge that builds confidence are the underpinnings of good parenting. Parents can understand and perhaps enjoy their children once they are equipped with education. A marked decrease in child abuse may occur. Parental knowledge and confidence can be the results of an informative and timely newsletter. There are also several other sources with which parents can rely to develop their parenting knowledge.

Support Systems for Parenting Information

When parents seek out parental information, books and other printed materials are the most often cited source for general information. Parenting newsletters obviously fall into that category. However, there are two other sources that often follow close behind. Parents also seek advice from friends and relatives and from the medical community[7] (MacPhee, 1984: 88-89). These three sources can all empower the parent and reinforce the information that each source provides. Therefore, it is important to discuss the medical community and the social network spheres of influence.

Physicians as a Resource

The health care system is capable of fulfilling parents' many educational needs concerning child development and behavior. Yet visits to the doctor rarely give parents sufficient information. There are two obstacles proposed by David MacPhee in his research on receiving effective family counseling.

> Pediatricians may not receive adequate training in child development; or parental expectations about the health provider's role, in concert with the pediatrician's reluctance to assume nontraditional responsibilities, may restrict permissible topics of conversation to clinical and care-taking concerns (MacPhee, 1984: 87).

Well child visits last from 10 to 15 minutes on the average. Most conversation consists of medical and physical concerns rather than guidance and behavior. The communication tends to be one way—the pediatrician gives information and the parent

receives it, often without questioning the physician. The primary reason for well child visits is not disseminating parenting information. Further, neither the pediatrician nor the parents expect the provider's role to include discussion about parenting. This type of communication can have a spiraling affect on the information exchange between the health provider and the parents—the parents are reluctant to ask non-medical questions and the provider believes that the parent should go elsewhere for advice on child development[8] (MacPhee, 1984: 88-89).

MacPhee conducted a study in which he proposed two hypotheses. One concerned the training deficit hypothesis, which proposed that physicians were inadequately trained in providing child development and parenting guidance. The second hypothesis, concerned role-differentiation, which proposed that neither the physician nor the parent feel comfortable giving and receiving child development and parenting advice. To test these hypotheses a study was conducted by randomly sampling pediatricians and psychologists. Each were sent a questionnaire entitled the Knowledge of Infant Development Inventory (KIDI). The format included four general areas of parenting. As expected by the researchers, the psychologists rated higher in developmental principles category and the pediatricians answered the health and safety questions more accurately. Both groups achieved high scores on the parenting category (MacPhee, 1984: 89, 90-92).

The pediatricians were asked additional questions about the frequency with which certain questions were asked by the parents. The level of knowledge was not always associated with the most frequent topic approached. For example, when to begin toilet training was an issue that was asked nearly twice as much as any other issue and yet the pediatrician only rated it eighth in knowledge. The results of the questionnaire demonstrated the lack of consistency of the questions broached by parents and the physician's knowledge of the topic. Experience in the profession affected the

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[7] See for example, Sauter, 1996, Riley, 1996.
[8] The Director of Texas Tots Newsletter is interested in pursuing an up and coming field in which physicians would house Development Specialists to discuss developmental concerns with parents when their children visited the physician for medical reasons.

accuracy with which physicians answered the parenting questions. Physicians with 14-23 years experience rated most accurate.

The results of the study supported the role-differentiation hypothesis. By contrast, the results did not support the training deficit hypothesis because pediatricians were found to possess as much knowledge on infant development as the psychologists. McPhee concluded that while the pediatrician appeared competent in discussing child development issues, discussion of such matters were an exception (MacPhee, 1984: 97-99).

Parent Groups as a Resource

Parents have long enjoyed the practice of consulting with one another for practical parenting advice. As society changes from a stable family structure to that of a more volatile one, parents often seek out people who share similar needs. These structures can be in the form of educational support groups for mothers. Playgroups are popular informal support structures that involve a group of parents who take turns taking care of each other's children. The benefit to a playgroup is that it allows parents to directly impact the activities of their children (Peabody-Broad and Towner-Butterworth, 1991: 2). Playgroups also benefit mothers who can socialize with one another as their children play.

Aside from informal structures, there are also formal playgroups. Formal playgroups use a facilitator to lead the group direction. The Parents After Childbirth Education (PACE) program is a type of formal playgroup that uses facilitators who must have passed fairly rigorous examinations. PACE focuses on giving the mother the confidence she needs to raise her baby the best she can. The facilitators do not instruct or lecture but rather advance group discussion. A group consists of 8-10 women and their babies. The facilitated group last for eight sessions and may continue thereafter. All mothers are welcome to discuss problems and ways to triumph over them[9] (Conte et. al., 1990: 17).

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[9] PACE is similar to Parens' ECDP groups in structure and objective.

Physicians and parenting support groups may provide good parenting information at a time when the parents are in most need. However, there are those who have attempted to incorporate parenting skills into the comprehensive curriculum that primary and secondary schools provide. If parenting skills are taught early in a child's education, then the demand for physicians to become parenting experts or for parents to form support groups on top of their busy schedules, may lessen.

Parenting in School Curriculums

Parenting education classes, information and studies have typically been centered on the adolescent or young adult parent. However, there is reason to support parenting classes that take place in public elementary schools. Like Henri Parens, William Singletary purports that parenting education for children should take place in the school curricula. Singletary suggests that comprehensive programs such as early intervention programs and parenting education in public schools "...can have a significant impact on many of our most urgent social problems, such as teenage pregnancy, low birth weight infants, child abuse and neglect, school dropout, welfare dependency, crime and violence." Singletary's assertions are not alone, he derives support from the World Health Assembly, which in 1986 advocated "...the teaching of parenting in public schools as one element in the primary prevention of neurological, mental, and psychosocial disorders" (Earls and Eisenberg, 1991 as cited by Singletary, 1993: 162-63).

Singletary illustrates a program developed by Parens called Learning About Parenting: Learning to Care. The program is in place in over fifty schools across the country. As a result of the curriculum fifth graders have demonstrated more knowledge about parenting skills. For example, they can provide alternatives to punitive solutions when faced with a hypothetical situation about difficult child-rearing scenarios (Singletary, 1993: 162-63).

Providing parenting education to elementary age children appears to be more effective than providing parenting education in secondary school according to Annette Pfannenstiel and Alice Honig. Often by the time students reach child bearing age in

adolescence, the ability to reach them has lessened considerably. Parenting education is widely available in high school, unfortunately the motivation to attend those classes is low (Pfannenstiel and Honig, 1991: 105). Yet, sexually active high school teens may be at risk for unplanned pregnancies because of their ignorance in sexual education, including the fact that they fail to use birth control. Two out of three sexually active teens do not use contraceptives. Common reasons cited are that they consider the risk of pregnancy is low or they were not anticipating intercourse. Vocal components of American society have argued against sex education in schools out of convictions that sex education will legitimize sex and increase sexual behavior. Other developed countries that do not encounter resistance to sex education in the schools have had much lower adolescent pregnancy rates than America (Trussell, 1988: 262).

The medical community, peer groups and educational institutions are all successful to some degree at providing parenting information but people who receive adequate parenting education from these methods is far from extensive. By contrast, parenting newsletters have the potential to be a widely used and adequate parenting education tool.

Parenting Newsletters as a Parenting Education Vehicle

Parenting newsletters are "learn-at-home educational series" designed to inform and teach parents about their new babies and raising those babies during their formative (0-3) years (Riley, 1996: 2,4). Newsletters are a popular form of parental education with state and local government family education programs such as the cooperative extension agencies because they are inexpensive and effective education tools. Many parents enjoy receiving information in this manner because it is presented in a credible and unobtrusive way (Physicians, group settings, classes, and schools all require the person to leave the security of her home and become vulnerable to the scrutiny of others.) The printed text often gives credibility to the information provided by the newsletters and influences parents to equip themselves with the knowledge of positive child rearing (Laurendeau, 1991: 208-210).

Newsletter Effectiveness

Newsletters have an advantage of being created and distributed in a relatively short period of time compared with other educational tools. Adults learn best when information is given to them in a timely, appealing and understandable way. The information produced in age-paced parenting newsletters meets those criteria. Parents typically receive their newsletters on a monthly basis usually beginning a few months prior to birth (Cudaback, 1990: 172-73). "The first year of life is a critical period, both as a foundation for later child development and as a period in which new parents establish their patterns of child rearing" (Riley, 1991: 248). Thus, the timing aspect of the newsletter is of utmost importance.

Age-pace is a term used for newsletters containing information appropriate to the child's age. Age-pacing allows the parents to receive highly relevant information when they most need it. Further, research suggests that parents who received newsletters on a monthly basis compared to parents who received newsletters three at a time, were "…significantly more likely to report improved parenting practices, increased parental confidence, and decreased parental worry as a result of reading the newsletters" (Riley, 1991: 248).

Newsletters reach those families that need intervention most but who usually do not seek out parenting advice. "Abusive families tend to be socially isolated" (Riley, 1991: 248). The most common reason for child abuse is unrealistically high parental expectations for their infants. Unrealistic expectations causes parents to lose patience and become abusive when infants fail to act as expected. Education can change these unrealistic and often dangerous perceptions. An evaluation of *Parenting the First Year* newsletter found its newsletter to have actually caused parents to hit their babies less often. "…parents reported actually spanking or slapping their baby fewer times in the previous week if they had received [the newsletter]" (Riley, 1996: 10). Riley attributes this finding to the fact that the information provided offers parents several different alternatives to hitting to affect behavior.

Of course, the positive aspects of parenting newsletters does not alleviate the need for progress in the other available parenting support systems mentioned previously. Unlike face-to-face discussions with doctors, peers, educators, newsletters are impersonal. There is no immediate resource to answer questions that a parent may have after reading the newsletter. (Some newsletters are beginning to offer a question and answer hotline to readers.) Moreover, newsletters cannot intervene and overcome the negative forces in families' lives such as poverty an abusing spouse or even a colicky baby (Riley, 1991: 251).

Overall, parents who receive parenting newsletters are overwhelmingly satisfied and believe the newsletter is effective. There are several studies that substantiate customer satisfaction.[10] These studies reported that the majority of respondents read all or most of the newsletter articles and considered them at least somewhat useful. Moreover, respondents reported that they changed their behaviors because of the information contained in the newsletters.

However, as is the case with surveys in general, there were two cautionary issues reported. One issue is that skewed results could occur as the questionnaires were returned voluntarily. This may result in higher marks for the newsletter because only those who benefited completed the questionnaire. Secondly, although parents reported changed behavior, it could not be proven by survey research that parents actually changed their behavior due to the newsletter information.[11] Parenting education in general contains this bias, therefore making it difficult for researchers to know its true effectiveness. Marvin Fine, editor of two books on parent education suggests that consumer satisfaction takes precedence over other criteria for effectiveness:

> One difficulty with obtaining research data is that most parent education leaders are practitioners, not researchers. Consequently, consumer satisfaction, which indeed is often achieved, is the main criterion by which effectiveness gets judged.

Fine continues,

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[10] See for example, Cudaback et al. 1990; Riley, 1991 & 1996; Laurendeau et. al. 1991; Sauter, 1996.
[11] See for example, Nelson, 1986: 186-187, Cudeback et. al, 1990: 175.

The more humanistic, relational, and communication-based training programs tend to look at changes in parent attitudes, beliefs, and values, with less focus on what they actually do differently with their children or if their children benefit (Fine, 1980: 22-23).

The format of parenting newsletters have changed little since the original newsletter, *Pierre Pelican*, was created in 1947 by Lloyd Rowland. The format consisted of age-paced information that was well illustrated and easy to read. The issues were distributed at birth and monthly for the first year and bimonthly for the second year. Interestingly, Rowland had intended for the newsletters to be a basic educational tool used to reduce anxiety for the new mother. However, soon after the newsletters gained acceptance, it was promoted by those who wanted it as an education tool to prevent child abuse (Fine, 1980: 256-58).

Newsletter Effectiveness: Cooperative Extension Study

As of 1990, 19 state cooperative extension programs were distributing aged-paced newsletters. Ten of those programs were evaluated by Cudaback et. al. The researchers were interested in learning whether the newsletters were reaching the targeted audiences and if those recipients thought the newsletters were useful and had an impact on the parenting attitudes and behaviors. Cudaback et al. surveyed a sample of recipients of each of the 10 newsletters who made up a cross-section of race, income, education and marital status. Ninety-six percent of 2,263 respondents indicated that they read all or most of the articles and 66% kept the newsletters for future reference (Cudeback, et. al., 1990: 173). More than 50% indicated that they changed four out of five behaviors due to the newsletter while less than 12% indicated that they did not change any of their behaviors. Minorities and those in the low income bracket, less educated and young or single were among those more likely to change their behaviors as a result of the newsletter than other groups. This finding was encouraging to the researchers because it is those at-risk populations that the newsletter often targets.

The researchers cautioned against generalizing their findings. As is typical with the other studies—those returning the survey may have benefited more than those who did not therefore skewing the results positively. Additionally, the evaluation could not

determine if the parents who reported changing their behavior actually did so (Cudeback, et. al., 1990, pp. 174-75).

Newsletter Effectiveness: Parents Magazine Study

Another survey, which assessed the effectiveness of *Parents Magazine*,[12] a newsletter distributed to new parents monthly for the first year and bimonthly for the following two years, corroborated the above results. A study was conducted on four hundred families who initially received the magazine. They were recruited from prenatal classes. Surveys were conducted on the acceptability of the magazine (Laurendeau, 1991: 211). Age, income level, ethnic origin or number of children did not have an affect on readership. One out of three families reported that *Parents Magazine* was the only source of parenting information they received. Those with the lowest incomes reported the highest percentage in that category. Ninety-three percent of the recipients indicated that they were satisfied with the magazine and would recommend it to a friend. The same percentage indicated that the articles directly benefited them (Laurendeau, 1991: 214-15).

There was a control group used in this experiment and this group reported no difference in parental attitudes in their role as parent, parental competence, and punishment as a means of discipline from the families who had their babies the year before the magazine was offered. The experimental group indicated more positive attitudes in these areas than the control group. In addition to confirming results of consumer satisfaction and behavioral changes found in other studies, the results also corroborate data indicating that all levels of income and education read materials— however, more highly educated respondents read more frequently (Laurendeau, 1991: 217-19).

Newsletter Effectiveness: Growing Together Project

The Growing Together Project is an extensive experiment funded by four federal programs to evaluate the use of parenting newsletters by their target audience (all

parents of limited resources). The project began out of concern for an at-risk population (teen parents, single parents, low-income and low education) not receiving adequate parenting information. The project is highlighted because it adhered to the most strict experimental controls despite the transient nature of the subjects. Four state cooperative extension agencies that produced newsletters participated in the project. These were: Delaware *(Great Beginnings)*, Nevada *(Little Lives)* South Carolina *(Baby Talk)* and California *(Parent Express)* (Dickinson, 1992: 1).

The project was designed to evaluate the newsletters in the effort to accomplish the following:

- Increase their knowledge of child development
- Promote their children's language and intellectual development
- Use effective, non-abusive discipline and guidance; and
- Enhance their confidence as caregivers and teachers of their children

Recruited participants consisted of low income parents in each of these four states. These 2,196 individuals (96.4% mothers) were already parents of children ages birth to 25 months or pregnant women who were due to deliver by March 1, 1990. The participants completed a questionnaire designed to assess their level of need for parenting information. Once they completed the questionnaire, the participants received the parenting newsletters for the next 18 months. Once the 18 months was completed, the participants completed a post-test similar to the pre-test questionnaire with additional questions about their use of the parenting newsletters. There were 796 parents who could be contacted for the follow-up questionnaire and thus comprised the project sample. Post-test responses were compared with the pre-test responses of the 1,400 nonrespondents. Attitudes of the two groups (project sample and nonrespondents) were different in several ways: the nonrespondents were more likely to answer the questions incorrectly with regard to affection, attention, discipline, child development, language, and nutrition and health (Dickinson, 1992: 2-3). Project Evaluator, Nancy Dickinson observed that,

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[12] The *Parent Magazine* described in this study is not the same as the popular commercial version.

Forty-three percent of the first interview sample who dropped out before completing the project included the neediest parents with the biggest environmental challenges. These were more often the young, minority, unmarried, less educated, welfare dependent, and unemployed parents.

Data collection for the first questionnaire was usually conducted by project staff in individual (30%) or group interviews (23%) at whichever location the respondent usually visited (e.g. Head Start, WIC, Health Department). The non-project staff at these locations interviewed the remaining percentage either in person, by telephone or mailed surveys. Data collection for the second questionnaire were primarily obtained by telephone or mailed surveys. The researchers knew with this type of population the sample size in the follow-up interview would be much smaller. Different cooperative extension agencies tried different outreach techniques to enhance the number of responses. These techniques included withholding the last newsletter until the questionnaire was returned or providing an incentive to respond by giving coupons or instructions on how to make toys for children upon receipt of the questionnaire. The most successful technique used was to simply call the parents and survey the parents over the telephone (Dickinson, 1992: 9).

Unlike the available literature suggests, this study shows that the limited resource population chose to rely on family and friends for sources of parenting information as their primary choice (80.8% pre-test versus only 79.1% post test). The post-test responses indicated that recipients were more willing to turn to the medical community (60.1% pre test versus 65.5% post test) or even to television (28.2% pre test versus 34.8% post test) than before reading the newsletters (Dickinson, 1992: 12).

Disciplining babies and children is a critical area where uninformed parents can make poor parenting decisions. The questionnaire devoted five items that gauged attitudes about disciplinary techniques. Respondents did not significantly change their views on physical discipline. However, Dickinson attributes the lack of growth in this area to the fact that none of the parenting newsletters dissuaded readers from physically punishing their children. The newsletters instead offered alternatives to physical discipline and mentioned the potential negative psychological and physical affects. And lastly, the study included five questionnaire items for the "informed parental caring

scale," which "taps parental attitudes about discipline and knowledge about child development and health." (E.g. Some days you need to discipline your baby; other days you can ignore the same thing.) These questions, if answered incorrectly, indicate parent's uneducated impulses.

> Impulsive parents are often ego-centered and behave in ways that are easier for the parents rather than responsive to the needs of their children. Education can teach people to behave responsibly, so that more highly educated parents may be more likely to make informed parenting decisions based on the needs of their children rather than convenience for themselves (Dickinson, 1992: 25).

On average the respondents showed a modest albeit positive growth of .74 points between the pre test and post test responses for the informed parenting questions. The results of the informed parenting questions enabled Dickinson et. al. to conclude that the parenting booklets helped the least educated parents gain knowledge and change attitudes about caring for their offspring. (Dickinson, 1992: 25, 34).

Texas' Parenting Newsletter

As indicated in Chapter 1, this applied research project attempts to establish a practical ideal type for parenting newsletters as its primary purpose and assess the Texas parenting newsletter against the practical ideal type as its secondary purpose. There are several reasons to compare the Texas parenting newsletter with the practical ideal type – the most esoteric reason is that the newsletter was the catalyst for this particular project. Moreover, the project is being conducted under the auspices of a Texas state university. However, there are perhaps more valid reasons for assessing the Texas parenting newsletter, *Texas Tots*.

Texas is a state with tremendous wealth and poverty. Its demographic make-up consist of a large minority population. Less than half of the private sector offers health insurance to its employees and slightly more than half of those employers contribute to those health plans. Texas also has a substantive adolescent population, which contributes to 16% of births. And yet, as of 1996, Texas had a lower infant mortality rate than the national average (6.5 infant deaths per 1,000 births versus 7.2). Texas has

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fewer low birthweight babies born than the national average (7.2% per 1,000 versus 7.4%) (National Center For Health Statistics Web Page, 1998). Contributions to these positive statistics are perhaps largely due to the fact that the medical community has made tremendous strides in saving babies and the fact that almost 80% of mothers received prenatal care in the first trimester. Since 1992, *Texas Tots* has inundated the Medicaid community, the hospitals and social services with its newsletters. While, the scope of this research does not answer whether *Texas Tots* can be linked to healthier Texas babies, it is interesting to discover whether this newsletter, which has been distributed on a broad basis, compares favorably.

One agency supported by the Texas Legislature is Foundations for a New Texas (FNT). FNT is an "interagency work group of public and private programs...organized to promote prevention and early intervention activities that support, strengthen, and educate all Texas families" (Sauter, 1996: 1). This cooperative work group grew out of the desire to stem the increasing number of child abuse cases. Parenting education was considered the best avenue in child abuse prevention. FNT seeks educational tools that are effective and low cost.

Parenting Express, an age-paced parenting newsletter created from the University of California at Berkley, was the model for *Texas Tots*. The goal of *Texas Tots* was to strengthen the family and to give parents the support and knowledge they need to become their children's primary and instrumental teachers (Sauter, 1996: 2).

Texas Tots design and structure is similar to other parenting newsletters. It is available in three age sets targeted for parents of infants, and two and three years olds. The infant set consist of 15 eight page monthly newsletters with two issues beginning prior to birth. The two and three year old series consist of six 12 page newsletters issued bi-monthly. More than 300,000 new parents have received the newsletter since the fall of 1993. More than 100 Texas hospitals use the newsletters in their visitation packets. And, the Medicaid Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment Program uses the newsletter as a primary outreach tool.

During the Spring of 1995, *Texas Tots* staff, which is part of FNT, conducted a survey to determine parents' response to the newsletters—specifically in the area of

newsletter effectiveness for parents whose infants received Medicaid. The survey consisted of 281 mothers who gave birth during the months of August and September 1993 and had received the newsletter for over one year. The staff used random selection to obtain their respondents. Most of the participants were Medicaid recipients and most (58%) were married and/or first-time mothers (50%). Hispanics made up the largest respondent population with 35% reporting.[13] Sixty-one percent had at least graduated high school or had some college. Forty-seven percent of the mothers stayed at home full-time (Sauter, 1996: Table 1).

The results indicated that the newsletter was effective as a parent education tool. Ninety percent responded that they read all or most of the newsletter. Over 50% responded that they had learned something new. Twenty-eight percent responded that the newsletter was the only source of information they received. Over half of the respondents reported changing five out of 10 behaviors as a result of the newsletter. Medicaid parents were more likely to change those behaviors than non-Medicaid parents. As was true with previous evaluations, those parents with less education were more likely to report changing their behavior. "Almost two-thirds of the parents (63%) reported *Texas Tots* made them feel 'a lot' more confident as a parent while an additional 30% felt 'a little more' confident" (Sauter, 1996: 24). This particular question appears to be unique to *Texas Tots* as it was not referenced in other articles. The staff could not conclude whether reported behavioral changes translated to actual behavior changes because the staff was unable to observe the proposed behavior change. This issue was also stated in other reports as well.[14] The *Texas Tots* staff suggested that visits to the respondents' home to see if the parents actually changed their behavior may be appropriate in future studies.

Conceptual Framework

The literature review established that parenting newsletters are an effective and desirable education tool to those who receive them. The literature review did not

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[13] *Texas Tots* is available in Spanish, large print and audiotape.
[14] See for example, Cudaback, 1990 and Riley, 1991.

uncover any model that is currently in use. It appears that some states merely use another state's newsletter ver batim. Devoid of any newsletter model, there are nevertheless many characteristics that the newsletters should share. Therefore, this project uses descriptive categories based on the literature to develop a practical ideal type. There are five categories, with characteristics in each category (refer to Table 2.1). The five categories are: research-based articles, aged-paced information, production, distribution and organizational goal setting.

Research-based articles Category

The literature review reveals the studies that indicate there is a positive relationship between parental knowledge and parental attitudes. "Parental expectations have a powerful impact on the cognitive and psychosocial development of children" (Edwards-Beckett, 1992, p. 355). Inappropriate expectations by the parents toward their children is usually the source of parental ignorance and can lead to a host of social problems including child abuse.

Convincing parents of these findings has been through the use of research-based articles in the newsletters. Replication of newsletter evaluations indicated that parents changed their behavior due to information found in their newsletters. Dr. David Riley, creator of *Parenting the First Year* newsletter, explains it this way:

> Socialization research shows us that the more powerful and competent a role model is, the more likely it is to be copied. The newsletter [*Parenting the First Year*] took advantage of this by emphasizing that the advice was research-based..." (Riley, 1997: 429).

Age-paced information Category

Adults learn best when information is given to them in a timely, appealing and understandable way. The information produced in age-paced parenting newsletters meets those criteria. They are given to parents on a monthly basis usually beginning a few months prior to birth (Cudaback, 1990: 172). Thus the timing aspect of the newsletter is of utmost importance because it allows the parents to receive highly relevant information when they most need it. This category is also important because the literature review found that some newsletters were not age-paced, but were topical

in nature. Topical newsletters cannot give a holistic picture of a child's requirements at a given age.

Production Category

"Production is the process of turning manuscript into printed newsletter" (Volker, 1976: 19). Decisions must be made from proofing to printing.

> How [the] newsletter looks and reads affects how well it accomplishes its
> objectives. Readers notice both the tangible features such as the paper
> and printing quality and intangible features such as design and writing
> quality (Beach, 1988: 8).

Each of these decisions will affect the professional look of the newsletter and ultimately affect the level of readership. These decisions will vary from newsletter to newsletter but the following are some important characteristics essential to parenting newsletters.

Readability Subcategory

The consideration of readability formulas is an important factor in production. Readibility is defined as using formulas to assess how difficult a text is for a reader to comprehend. Readability theory states "the higher the word length and the higher the sentence length, the harder a document it is to understand" (Oral Report Outline). Therefore, one can understand why parenting newsletters, that reach all levels of literate population would want to keep their readability scores low (at an elementary level). Unfortunately, readability formulas have been criticized dating back to when they began use for textbook editing for primary and secondary schools in the 1920s. However, for lack of a better alternative, readability formulas continue to be used. If careful editing is not demanded, then readability formulas can often reduce the text so that it is uninteresting and misleading (Davidson, 1988: 36). Readability scores are less effective on the higher level text (e.g. college) where content weighs heavier.

When writing for readability formulas the length of the sentences do not vary much. However, the length of the articles do vary depending on the level of reading targeted. The use of conjunctions are more prevalent in older aged materials. The

differentiating factor of levels of difficulty is the "content and presentation of the subject matter." (Davidson, 1988: 40)

The last word of caution on readability formulas are that the formulas do not consider cohesiveness and overall organization. A text could rearrange sentences throughout the article so that it did not make sense to a person, but the formula would calculate it as if the sentences were in the correct order (Zakaluk and Samuels, 1988: 124). Some publishers make it a policy not to use readability formulas. They simply work within the grade level that they are targeting and the subject matter that interests that particular grade level.

Nevertheless, many parenting newsletters find it useful to use readability formulas. *Parenting the First Year* newsletter drafts its articles at the 5th grade reading level. *Texas Tots* drafts their articles at a 4th grade reading level (Riley, 1997: 429; Texas Tots Biennial Report 1993-94). It is important to know whether other parenting newsletters take readability or the writing styles in particular into consideration.

Visual Art Subcategory

There are several ways to visually express information. Graphics is art used to express information. Graphics can convey messages with a single image and therefore, are valuable space savers. However, each graphic should help the newsletter achieve its message.

> Design graphics make reading more efficient by separating, highlighting, and organization. They call or direct attention, signal the importance of an article, and break the monotony of solid text. Graphics can reinforce text by repeating or elaborating on information (Beach, 1988: 70).

Pictures are also considered part of the production category and an integral part of the entire newsletter presentation. They break up the written text, which make easier reading, and they also demonstrate visually how to accomplish a task (e.g. holding a baby properly). Like graphics, photos must be used only if they help to achieve the objectives of the newsletter. Whether or not to use photographs is an important decision. Photographs are costly and time consuming (Beach, 1988: 80).

Attractiveness Subcategory

Attractiveness is a part of the production category that encompasses color, professional typeface, and visual aesthetics. Color is but one of the elements to good design. Color influences feeling from the reader and it is important that the color convey the appropriate feeling for the newsletter. More than two colors (black and another color) is often unnecessary for newsletters (Beach, 1988: 96). If color is used, perhaps use it only for the masthead or logo. This method is known as pre-printing. Pre printing allows for color images to be produced at one time and then when the issue is completed, the ink is laid on top. Using color paper may make it difficult to read. It is best to use neutral tones when using colored paper (Blake and Stein, 1992: 14).

Font size and character is important to the overall look and readability of the newsletter. The typeface should not vary within the issue, although different font sizes or bolding may be used. The size should stay within the 9 point to 12 point range. The smaller the typestyle, the more text space there is. However, it also makes for more difficult reading (Blake and Stein, 1992: 15).

Resource Subcategory

Resource is the last subcategory of production. Resource is the attempt by the newsletter organization to inform the readers about additional assistance. It may be in the form of guiding them to a national or local number, address, or other book resources available. Giving additional resources increases the interchange between the reader and the newsletter. While the newsletter may not satisfy all questions a reader may have after reading a newsletter article, it can put the reader in touch with someone who can answer those questions.

Distribution Category

The literature review unearthed several different target audiences for parenting newsletters. Single mothers, single fathers, working women, adolescent mothers and parents of only-children were among the myriad of marketed recipients. Targeting an audience for a newsletter is complex. An audience should be limited to one or two

specific groups. If there are more than those groups that can be identified, then different newsletters may be needed. (E.g., childcare workers, parents and teachers could benefit from three different newsletters). Newsletter distribution increases its audience spectrum often without much thought as time goes by. Often, the newsletter may not be the best way to reach a particular audience. Success with one audience does not mean that targeting another audience will bring the same success (Beach, 1988: 8).

> Strong newsletters specialize. If you have more than one or two
> audiences, consider more than one newsletter. You can use some of the
> same articles and photos for the different publications and make them
> similar in design. As an alternative, produce special inserts for specific
> portions of the audience (Beach, 1988: 8).

The parenting newsletters usually separate their audience by the age of the child. Different series are produced for infants, two and three year olds. This research project will focus on those newsletters that target distribution to a general audience of new parents.

Distribution category concerns the number of people reached and retained. *Texas Tots* has made a commitment to delivering newsletters to the Medicaid population by delivering the newsletters free of charge. That commitment translates to over 172,000 Medicaid-eligible families during 1993-96 (Evaluation of *Texas Tots* Final Report, 1996). Approximately 200,000 newborn and first month issues were delivered to hospitals and midwives. Over 100 hospitals in Texas include the newsletter in their visitation packets. The newsletter is also available for purchase at $5 per set. More than 3,500 have purchased the newsletter. Several other local organizations have purchased sets to distribute throughout the community (Texas Tots Biennial Report, 1993-94).

Another characteristic of distribution is whether the organization benefits by charging a fee. To those on limited income a nominal fee may be a prohibiting factor to its purchase. Moreover, the cost may outweigh the benefit as the fee is usually so low that it may not cover production costs. *Texas Tots* charges a fee to some of its subscribers and yet *Parenting the First Year* does not (Texas Tots newsletter, Riley, 1997: 429). Certainly different organizations have different funding structures and

levels of commitment by stakeholders that make such decisions unique. However, it would be interesting to find out whether the organization would perceive a fee-based subscription as an inhibitor to growth in readership.

Organizational Goal-Setting Category

Strategic goals are the underpinnings of the entire newsletter effort. Without goals it is difficult to conceive of an organization's ability to move forward in promoting parenting education. For newsletters in general, the goal is what a particular newsletter intends to accomplish. Many newsletters are published to market ideas, increase profit, improve public relations or internal relations (Beach, 1988: 7). Goals should guide the content, design and budget of the newsletter. Strategic goals describe the desired future that is possible to attain given a time period of two to five years. These goals are based on, and are compatible with, the organization's mission or basic purpose. Goals provide definitive direction for either the entire organization major sub-unit. Goals serve as the cohesive "daytimer" that unifies the otherwise fragmented organization (Koteen, 1997: 124-125). Many parenting newsletter staff work within cooperative extension agencies or state health department. Assuredly, these staff members compete with other interests within the organization. Cooperative extensions are research and educational institutions that inform the public in a wide range of areas such as consumer fraud and integrated pest management practices. Parenting newsletter staff may compete with these other areas to continue to reach its constituency.

When goals work for an organization they lead to excellence in success. Goals help ensure changes will be made to achieve the greatest results with the limited resources. They also contribute to the condition that promote future growth and success. Goals can also be the key to survival. In lean times, the organization must focus on those areas requiring change to cope with and survive.

Formulating goals involves chief executive leadership and commitment and participation from key staff. Strategic goals set:

> ...new directions, which in turn guide the formulation of new strategic initiatives, determine program changes, and begin to mobilize the means of institutional support to implement the new initiatives such as budget

requirements, staffing, and skill development. In effect, the strategic goals are the critical instruments for guiding the undertaking of desired change (Koteen, 1997:125).

Strategic goals may not be apparent to the average newsletter reader because they are not typically printed in the newsletter. However, it is interesting to examine the organizations' focus for the future.

Table 2.1 The Conceptual Framework
I. Research based articles
represents primary source (research based)
represents a secondary source (research based)
tertiary sources (non research based)
II. Age paced distribution
birth to 12 months
prenatal
13-24 months
25-36 months
III. Production
readability
visual art
attractiveness
color
professional typeface
visual aesthetics
resource for readers
IV. Distribution
target audience
accessibility (fee or free)
retention effort
V. Organizational Goals
specified goals

Conclusion

Newsletters are a popular and cost-effective educational tool for parents to use. Newsletters can become integrated into a comprehensive education program that begins when parents are still school-age. Dr. Margaret Mahler contends that "...education of parents subserves prevention and early intervention, which...are the answers to major problems of our time" (as quoted in Singletary, 1993: 151-52). William Singletary states that parenting programs can "..combat a pervasive sense of hopelessness and helplessness and can lead to a realistic optimism and to a determination to successfully confront our current social crisis" (Singletary, 1993: 152).

Positive evaluations and comments by newsletter readers demonstrate the exciting possibility that parenting newsletters can combat hopelessness and helplessness at a very basic level—through education. The practical ideal type will help to ascertain whether the existing newsletters can improve upon their own structures. The practical ideal type can provide a tool for those who are beginning to craft a parenting newsletter. It makes sense to develop a logical model that will give the practitioner information about why certain components are desirable. Practitioners in the public sector should find such a model very useful when they consider parenting education newsletter or for similar educational tools.

Chapter III Methodology

Purpose

The methodology chapter discusses the appropriateness of the type of research selected for assessing parenting newsletters. It also discusses the structure of the survey instrument and coding sheet (content analysis) developed based on the descriptive categories extracted from the literature.

Research Techniques

Content analysis and survey research are the research techniques used to address the research question. Content analysis is appropriate because the nature of the research ascertains whether there are commonalities within parenting newsletters based on

parenting education literature. If there are not commonalities, then it would appear beneficial to the parenting education community to use an ideal type as a guide to develop or modify existing newsletters. The newsletter analysis is separated into five descriptive categories. The coding sheet and the survey instrument are collectively used to obtain information regarding these five categories and their characteristics. (Refer to Table 3.1.)

Content Analysis

Content analysis works well as a research technique in the study of communications because it can answer the "Who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect?" (Babbie, 1992: 314). A newsletter is a highly popular way for organizations to communicate their message. Separating the newsletter into categories and creating a coding system enables understanding what information is communicated (research based articles), if it is read, understood and used (distribution, production and age-paced), and what is its effect (organizational goals). Content analysis' unobtrusiveness is appealing in this project because it allows the researcher to evaluate existing data and draw conclusions from it without effecting the object under study.

Survey Research

In this particular project, survey research is also used to supplement content analysis. The categories such as age-paced, distribution, goals, research-based articles can only be answered by people who are directly involved with the implementation of the newsletter. The survey instrument includes open and closed ended questions to try and obtain some of the more underlying meanings that may add to the content analysis.

Triangulating the techniques

Survey and content analysis in other instances served to reinforce each other and are a form of triangulation. If both sources of evidence (survey, content analysis) give similar information, the results have greater validity. An advantage of content analysis and survey research is that they can result in a high degree of reliability. The coding

sheet will let the reader of the research know how the result was measured. Moreover, using only one researcher to code the information will prevent any misinterpretation of the data, further strengthening the reliability aspect.

A disadvantage is that the techniques can be weak in validity. Coding relies on the frequency of occurrences and not necessarily the depth or meaning of those occurrences (Babbie, 1992: 318-19). Another possible weaknesses in the selected techniques, is that the categories used in this particular research may not have been the same categories used by another researcher attempting to create a practical ideal type for parenting newsletters. The descriptive categories are based on the literature review, which provides leverage against this weakness.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument consists of 12 open and close-ended questions based on the five categories described. The respondents have opportunities to make comments wherever applicable. The survey requests a copy of a recent newsletter sample and any additional information or reports containing the organizations goals. The instrument was pre-tested by David Riley, creator of *Parenting the First Year*, Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service. Some modifications were made based on his comments prior to its nationwide distribution. (Refer to Appendix B for survey sample.)

Population

This particular research concerns parenting newsletters distributed in the 50 states. Therefore it provides an opportunity for the entire population to be surveyed. No sample was needed. Upon receipt of all forthcoming parenting newsletter samples and surveys assessment commenced based on the categories and characteristics laid out in the coding sheet in Appendix A. The survey instrument is sent directly to those persons responsible for their parenting newsletters. Those people are usually family life or education specialists within the state extension agencies.

Statistics Used

For the purposes of this research, simple statistical analysis was conducted. All tables are calculated using frequency and percent distribution. Frequency distribution is calculated by adding the responses within each particular question. Percent distribution is calculated by dividing the number of responses by the total number of respondents participating in the survey. In some cases, the total number is different if the respondents did not answer the question or did not provide a newsletter sample.

Table 3.1 Operationalizing the Conceptual Framework		
Category	Source of Evidence	Variable Measure
Research based articles		
represents primary source (research based)	survey instrument & content analysis	Question 1a
represents a secondary source (research based)	survey instrument & content analysis	Question 1b
tertiary sources (non research based)	survey instrument & content analysis	Question 1c-f
Age paced distribution		
birth to 12 months	content analysis & survey instrument	yes/no & Question 2b
prenatal	content analysis & survey instrument	yes/no & Question 2c
13-24 months	content analysis & survey instrument	yes/no & Question 2d
25-36 months	content analysis & survey instrument	yes/no & Question 2e
Non aged paced distribution	survey instrument	Question 3
Production		
readability	survey instrument	Question 4
visual art	content analysis	
attractiveness	content analysis	
color	content analysis	yes/no
professional typeface	content analysis	yes/no
visual aesthetics	content analysis	yes/no
resource for readers	content analysis	yes/no
Distribution		
target audience	survey instrument	Question 5
accessibility (fee or free)	survey instrument	Question 6 & 7
retention effort	survey instrument	Questions 9 & 10
Goals		
specified goals	survey instrument & content analysis	Question11 & 12 additional documents provided by org.

The methodology chapter sets the framework by which the research is conducted. The next chapter explains the results obtained from the research.

Chapter IV Results

Purpose

This chapter discusses the results of a survey sent out to organizations that distribute parenting newsletters. The cumulative results serve the first purpose of the research, which is to develop a best practice based on the literature. The survey instrument was based on the five descriptive categories that make up the ideal type— research based articles, aged paced distribution, production, distribution and goals.

The survey instrument requested a newsletter sample. The newsletter sample aided in content analysis and was relied on heavily in the production category. In the other categories, the newsletter sample either substantiated or clarified the survey comments.

General Information About Respondents

Of the 50 states, 39 were contacted primarily through the use of electronic mail. Nineteen states were unreachable after several attempts to contact. It is not known whether they have a parenting newsletter. Seventeen surveys were returned and 16 of those surveys are used in the results. The 17th survey from Connecticut, concerns a newsletter primarily for childcare providers and thus is not used. The remaining nine states ultimately did not participate in the survey. Although 16 surveys are used, not all of the results reflect the 16 responses. One state did not provide a newsletter sample and other states left a couple of questions blank.

A second purpose of the research is to compare the *Texas Tots* parenting newsletter to the ideal type and other parenting newsletters. Each category includes a table that reflects the results of the survey using the sum total of the states responding. In all categories the sum total includes the *Texas Tots* newsletter. *Texas Tots* has its own column so that those results are readily available. The word "Yes" indicates the appropriate response for *Texas Tots*.

Research Based Articles Category

The 16 respondents were asked to choose where they got their information for writing newsletter articles. They had six choices and could check one or more choice. These choices were suggested by Dr. David Riley, University of Wisconsin, who pre-tested the survey instrument. Riley suggested that 1) journal articles reporting original research and 2) book chapters summarizing research findings be considered research based. All other categories such as 3) books containing "how to" advice for parents; 4) other newsletters or pamphlets with advice for parents; 5) individual experience; and 6) "other" be categorized as tertiary sources. The table below reflects the degree to which the respondents indicated that they used researched based articles.

Table 4.1 Research Based Articles

Research based articles contained in newsletters *survey instrument Q.1 and content analysis*	Texas Tots Newsletter	Frequency	Percent of Respondents (N=16)
• all research sources used		2	12.5%
• mostly research sources used		2	12.5%
• an even mix of research and tertiary sources used	yes	7	43.8%
• mostly tertiary sources used		2	12.5%
• all tertiary sources used		3	18.8%
TOTAL		16	100.1%

Almost half of the newsletters (43.7%) used an even mix of research and tertiary sources. Ideally, the newsletters would contain all or mostly research based articles. Results indicated that in fact only 25% met this criteria.

Survey results reveal that several organizations rely on information in other parenting newsletters. Newsletters often cited articles written by professors from other extension agencies that produce parenting newsletters. Hence, if articles are simply reproduced from a newsletter that used research based information, the actual number of research based articles may be higher.

In comparing similar age based newsletters, the information was alike in each newsletter. The cause of babies cry, feeding schedules, frequencies of diaper changes

and the developmental stages of a baby, are common examples. Although not all of the articles were read by the researcher, most newsletter articles appeared to use a neutral tone in their advice-giving to parents. The articles were often written in an experiential tone. Sometimes, the baby appeared to be writing to the parent. For example, Delaware's *Great Beginnings* newsletter has an entire page devoted to the developmental stages of a four month old. It begins with a section on "How I Grow" and discusses the abilities of a baby in the first person context (e.g. I turn my head in all directions, I lift my head when I'm on my back and grab my feet with my hands). This type of writing style allows for research based information to be relayed in a reader friendly and precise manner.

In one instance an article was perceived as coercive. It concerned frequencies of diaper changes and assumed that the reader would be using cloth diapers and discussed how to clean cloth diapers. Only at the end of the article were disposable diapers mentioned as an option. The article cautioned that disposables were too expensive to use everyday. This type of writing style can easily occur in the absence of research based information or if the writer conveys her values to the reader.

Age-Paced Distribution Category

Timeliness is a quality vital to newsletters. Since babies make developmental changes so quickly, newsletters should be produced in a timely manner. In addition, they fill a need to communicate upcoming events, current issues, etc. However, age-paced is a characteristic that appears unique to parenting education. The highly popular pregnancy and first year books *What To Expect When You're Expecting* and *What To Expect The First Year* by Eisenberg et. al. also follow this month by month format.

Table 4.2 Age Paced Distribution

Newsletters distributed based on the age of the child *survey instrument Q. 2,3*	Texas Tots Newsletter	Frequency	Percent Distribution (N=16)
• topically based		3	18.8%
• prenatal series (2-3 months prior to birth)	yes	5	31.3%
• infant series (birth through 12 months)	yes	12	75%
• toddler series (13-24 months)	yes	12	75%
• toddler series (25-36 months)	yes	11	68.8%
• beyond 3 years series		2	12.5%

The respondents were asked if their newsletters were age-paced. The majority (81.2%) had aged-paced issues. Three newsletters that were not age-paced were considered topical. Those topical newsletters targeted parents of school aged children. Of the three, one newsletter targeted adolescent issues in particular.

The respondents were asked to check all applicable age-paced series they currently distribute. A majority distributed at least three series: the infant series (75%), and the two year old series (75%) and three year old series (68.8%). Two newsletters published by Maine and Mississippi have series for parents of four and five year olds respectively, in addition to ages one to three. It appears that parenting newsletters focus on the first three years of life because research indicates these are the formative years. It would have been interesting to find out which series is most valued by its readership. According to Margaret Mckim, parents most relied on reading materials during the first three months after birth (McKim, 1987: 24).

The prenatal series would appear to be a highly desirable series for the new parent. Yet, only 31.3% of the respondents provide a prenatal series. However, Wisconsin is in the process of preparing prenatal series. Once Wisconsin completes its production, several other states may use its version.[15]

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[15] Twelve other extension agencies are reported to use Wisconsin's newsletter. However, only one of those states (Oregon) participated in the survey with the Wisconsin version of the newsletter.

The ideal type includes a prenatal series in addition to the series for the first three years of life. The prenatal series helps to begin the process of building knowledge and confidence in a parent prior to the baby's arrival. Surprisingly, the results found no states to have prenatal series covering the entire nine months of pregnancy. Lack of proper prenatal care is a major contributor to low birthweight babies in the United States. "Birthweight is one of the most important predictors of an infant's subsequent health and survival" (National Center for Health Statistics, 1998). Many women could rectify this situation with proper knowledge of nutrition, exercise, and knowledge of the consequences of smoking, legal and illegal drug use, etc. Moreover, with information provided on typical developmental stages of a fetus, the woman could contact her health care provider if her pregnancy were different from a typical pregnancy and perhaps treat preventable conditions. No information was forthcoming from the literature review and the survey instrument did not delve into this issue, so the researcher can only conjecture about why a complete prenatal series is not provided.

Production Category

The newsletter production category includes four subcategories: readability, pictures, attractiveness and resource for readers. These subcategories are different than one might expect when assessing books, journals or even magazines. Newsletters are unique creatures of communication. They are written informally compared with other modes of written communication. The need for informality stems from the requirement for limited space, the promotion of the organization's values and the provision of practical and efficient information to the reader. Unlike other modes of communication, newsletter readers usually spend five minutes to read the entire newsletter. If the newsletter is longer than eight pages, the reader will probably lose interest (Beach, 1988: 4-5; 10, 33).

Readability Subcategory

Readibility is defined through formulas which assess how difficult a text is for a reader to comprehend. Readability formulas are often used for school textbooks.

Publishers of parenting newsletters have also come to rely on the formulas to discern the appropriate reading level for their articles. The literature review found that many of the parenting newsletters edited their newsletters using readability formulas. The newsletters are usually written at an elementary level to ensure comprehension by a majority of the population.

Table 4.3.1 Newsletter Production			
Readability formulas or other type of scrutiny to ensure comprehension used by newsletter staff. *survey instrument Q.4*	Texas Tots Newsletter	Frequency	Percent Distribution (N=16)
• Readability formulas or other type of scrutiny used	yes	14	87.5%
• No formal scrutiny used		2	12.5%
TOTAL		16	100%

Fifteen of the 16 respondents, published their newsletters under the auspices of a cooperative extension agency. Cooperative extension agencies are linked to state universities and often have academicians working on the newsletter staff. While not all of the respondents used readability formulas, 14 either used readability formulas or another type of scrutiny. Other types of scrutiny include using college professors, or reading specialists, or proofreaders to ensure that readability was of an appropriate level. Mississippi's *ABC's of Young Children* had an interesting method of review. The ABC newsletter was piloted using persons of low literacy. The two newsletters that reported using no scrutiny included those who relied on years of experience with the targeted population.

The literature review cited advantages and disadvantages to using readability formulas. (Refer to page 30). Therefore, the practical ideal type would include those 14 organizations that at least used specialists in the field, pilot groups or formulas to measure a certain level of comprehension.

Visual Art Subcategory

Parenting newsletters often convey an important message simply by visual demonstration. The assumption that some readers have low literacy levels makes it more important to use visual demonstrations whenever possible. All newsletters surveyed used visual art. However, only seven of them had art that could qualify as visual *demonstrations*. Photographs and sketches most accurately demonstrate a technique. Ideally, newsletters would include photographs and/or sketches that conveyed information. Almost half (46.7%) actually contained these demonstrations.

Table 4.3.2 Newsletter Production			
Visual art used in the newsletter *content analysis*	Texas Tots Newsletter	Frequency	Percent Distribution (N=15*)
• photographs	yes	4	26.7%
• sketches		3	20%
• clip art		8	53.3%
• no pictures used		0	0%
TOTAL		15	100%

*One organization did not provide a newsletter sample.

For example, Arizona's *School Begins at Birth* used a sketch of how to properly hold a one month old while bathing the baby. Delaware's *Great Beginnings* used both photographs and sketches in its four month old issue but the sketches were more visually appealing for demonstration purposes. For example, the issue included a sketch of how to properly tie back drapery or blind cords so that an infant would not strangle himself. The sketch took up a large amount of space so it may be assumed that the newsletter staff wanted to emphasize the dangers and how to rectify the situation. Another newsletter that uses only clip art discussed the dangers of cords for infants but it did not provide any visual demonstration or text on how to remedy the situation. Instead it devoted three lines of text within an article on child proofing the home.

Clip art was used most extensively by the newsletters responding. Half of the newsletters used clip art exclusively. While clip art can be used to achieve an overall

pleasing flow of the newsletter, writer Mark Beach of "Editing Your Newsletter", had this to say about clip art:

> Clip art was developed for display advertising, not editorial matter. When using it in a newsletter, objectives must be clear. Novice editors tend to use too many illustrations and to place them poorly...Use clip art sparingly. As with writing, take into account gender, age, race, and other possible sources of discrimination or stereotypes when selecting illustrations (Beach, 1988: 77).

Attractiveness Subcategory

The Attractiveness subcategory includes color, typestyle and visual aesthetics. After understanding more about why newsletter organizations use color, color is considered optional as a best practice. Lack of color alone, did not detract from newsletter attractiveness. While eight newsletters used color, the actual figure may have been higher. A few of the newsletters may have simply been photocopied for the researcher. However, one newsletter, *The Growing Years*, published in Maine, uses both color and white copies. The organization charges a fee for the "two color folded version" newsletter but not for the white copies. This organization obviously differentiates value of color versus black and white for its newsletters.

Table 4.3.3 Newsletter Production			
Attractiveness of the newsletter *content analysis*	Texas Tots Newsletter	Frequency	Percent Distributio n (N=15*)
color used • yes • no	 yes 	 8 7	 53.3% 46.7%
TOTAL		15	100%

*One organization did not provide a newsletter sample.

Typestyle is a characteristic in which all newsletter samples met the practical ideal type. All samples used uniform type consistently throughout the issue. Some samples used more than one font style, but the effect enhanced the appearance.

Table 4.3.4. Newsletter Production			
Attractiveness of the newsletter *content analysis*	Texas Tots Newsletter	Frequency	Percent Distribution (N=15*)
professional typeface			
• professional type	yes	15	100%
• amateur type		0	0%
TOTAL		15	100%

*One organization did not provide a newsletter sample.

Visual aesthetics includes tangible features such as printing and paper quality. Intangible features such as writing and design are not associated with visual aesthetics. Twelve samples were considered generally pleasing to read. Three were considered average. Of these three samples, one simply had too much text presented in a complex format. Columns were used to contain text on one page and not on the others. The second newsletter that had inadequate visual aesthetics had font that appeared to be a 9 or 10 point. The format used both sides of one page and was crammed with text. Though the typestyle met the ideal type, and it was two color, the overall image was bland. The third newsletter sample had articles that were too long. This particular issue could have been aided by the use of colored paper instead of black on white. These three samples run the risk of not being read by the reader.

Table 4.3.5 Newsletter Production			
Attractiveness of the newsletter *content analysis*	Texas Tots Newsletter	Frequency	Percent Distribution (N=15*)
visual aesthetics			
• generally pleasing to read	yes	12	80%
• average		3	20%
• does not capture the attention of the reader		0	0%
TOTAL		14	100%

*One organization did not provide a newsletter sample.

Resources Subcategory

Content analysis was used to discern whether newsletters offered additional resources such as phone numbers or addresses to organizations that could provide additional assistance. As established in the literature review, newsletters are typically a one-dimensional communication tool. This is considered a disadvantage for parenting newsletters. Some newsletter organizations attempt to alleviate this isolation by offering additional assistance.

For example, *Texas Tots* devotes half a page to resources in its column "Where to get help." All numbers listed in the *Texas Tots* prenatal issues are toll free and include a variety of services: healthcare referrals; the Medicaid Program Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment; the Texas Department of Health number for immunizations and other assistance; and an address for baby-care and parenting classes (Texas Tots, Vol. 1, No. 1). It is the resource information that distinguishes parenting newsletters from other types of parenting material such as the *What to Expect* series. For many parents who seek assistance, finding the right service can be daunting. A publicly funded newsletter has an obligation to include these types of resources in a comprehensive format such as a parenting newsletter. And yet, the results of the content analysis found that almost half (46.7%) of the samples did not provide any resources.

Table 4.3.6 Newsletter Production

Information sources provided to the reader for assistance in addition to the newsletter *content analysis*	Texas Tots Newsletter	Frequency	Percent Distribution (N=15*)
• one source of information provided on available resources		2	13.3%
• two or more sources of information provided on available resources	yes	6	40%
• no information provided on available resources		7	46.7%
TOTAL		15	100%

*One organization did not provide a newsletter sample.

Ideally, newsletters should have two or more sources of information provided on available resources. A modest 40% of the samples met the criteria. Some organizations simply distribute other state's newsletters. Obviously, those newsletters cannot use resources that are not available to other states. Oklahoma's *Parent Express* is copied ver batim from its model in California and therefore does not provide any Oklahoma resources. Wisconsin sells licenses to other states for its publication. David Riley has suggested that they delete the identifying material off of the back page and customize the page for local reference.

Distribution Category

The distribution category contains three subcategories: target audience, accessibility, and retention effort. All 16 respondents completed the questions in this category. Unfortunately, the results were weak because of a survey design flaw. However, the category also uncovers some false assumptions about the ideal type.

Target Audience Subcategory

The target audience of the newsletters largely consisted of all parents statewide. The survey did not request, and therefore the results could not determine, whether the target audience meant that all members of that state audience *received* the newsletters. Rather the survey focused on whether the information contained in the newsletters was reaching the appropriate audience. For example, Nebraska's *Ups and Downs of Adolescence* targeted parents, teachers, ministers and youth service professionals, all working or living with teens. The newsletter contained reoccurring departments such as "Diversity," which included topics such as divorce and generational gaps; and "Keeping Families First," which included topics such as family communication tools and career guidance resource. The articles demonstrated consistency with the target audience.

Those newsletters targeting all parents statewide spoke to parents of children in a specific age group series (ranging from birth to five years). Consequently, all newsletters met the ideal type.

Table 4.4.1 Newsletter Distribution

Newsletter's target audience *survey instrument Q. 5*	Texas Tots Newsletter	Frequency	Percent Distribution (N=16)
• all parents statewide		10	62.5%
• all first-time parents statewide	yes	3	18.8%
• government dependent parents		0	0%
• adolescent mothers/parents		1	6.3%
• other (new parents in grant programs; educators, parents, teachers)		2	12.5%
TOTAL		16	100.1%*

*Due to rounding, figures do not sum 100%.

Accessibility Subcategory

The accessibility subcategory reaped surprising results. It was initially assumed that the practical ideal type would include newsletters free of charge to all new parents. While a majority of newsletters are provided free (68.8%), those who charged a fee indicated fees were not an inhibiting factor in readership (Table 4.4.3). Although *Texas Tots* charges a fee to all non-Medicaid subscribers, board member Jane Crouch suggested that marketing difficulties was the primary factor inhibiting to readership expansion.

One newsletter indicated that while it charged a fee, fees could not be more than the cost of their production. This fee limitation is probably true for all other newsletters surveyed as well. Moreover, a majority of respondents (12 out of 16) indicated that other organizations could use the newsletter for distribution purposes. It is reasonable to conclude that while parenting newsletters are distributed to many low-income households, the fee factor may not deter readership. Consequently, the ideal type may be revised to allow fees as an option.

Table 4.4.2 Newsletter Distribution			
Newsletters provided for a fee *survey instrument Q. 6*	Texas Tots Newsletter	Frequency	Percent Distribution (N=16)
• newsletters are free to all subscribers		11	68.8%
• newsletters are free to government dependent	yes	1	6.3%
• all subscribers must pay a fee		3	18.8%
• up to local distributors		1	6.3%
TOTAL		16	100.2*%

*Due to rounding, figures do not sum 100%.

Table 4.4.3. Newsletter Distribution			
Fees are a inhibiting factor in expanding readership *survey instrument Q. 7*	Texas Tots Newsletter	Frequency	Percent Distribution (N=16)
• yes		0	0%
• no	yes	16	100%
TOTAL		16	100%

Retention Subcategory

The retention subcategory focused on how the newsletters are distributed. Again, the results were different from the proposed ideal. This subcategory is concerned with the effectiveness of newsletter distribution. The literature review did not discover any particular best practice for distribution. However, the survey inquired as to how the newsletter organizations maintained their databases so that distribution efforts could be better understood. The *Texas Tots* database is housed at a state agency and has access to state maintained databases. Fifteen of the 16 newsletters used extension staff working at the state level. However, many of the newsletters are not distributed at the state level. Rather, the newsletters are distributed by counties or other local organizations. Four of the respondents indicated the responsibility for maintaining newsletter database relies with the counties or other local organizations. One fourth of the respondents indicated that they did not maintain a database. It was not clear on how

their newsletters were distributed. The organizations often rely on hospitals and social service agencies to distribute the newsletters to new parents. This is an effective way to deliver a newsletter because a new parent can often discuss questions she may have with another person.

Table 4.4.4 Newsletter Distribution			
Retention of newsletter subscribers through database *survey instrument Q. 9, 10*	Texas Tots Newsletter	Frequency	Percent Distribution (N=16)
• no maintained database		4	25%
• maintained database	yes	8	50%
• counties or other organizations maintain database		4	25%
• change of address box provided		0	0%
TOTAL		16	100%

None of the newsletters include a change of address box. Initially, the practical ideal type would have required such a box. It is important that service not be interrupted due to relocation of a household. However, one newsletter reported using first class postage, which guarantees a forwarding address. Moreover, some of the newsletters that are distributed locally have local information on where to call if a reader is anticipating a move. This was not known until after communication with David Riley of *Parenting the First Year* about the results. The justification for not using change of address boxes is reasonable. Perhaps, changing the ideal type is warranted in this particular subcategory.

Organizational Goals Category

Goals are the guides by which successful organizations operate. The results of this portion of the survey were surprising and disconcerting. The survey inquired as to whether the organization had specified goals for its newsletter. All but one organization responded positively. However, when asked to describe the goals, many responses were vague and questionable. Over half (56.2%) of the respondents who indicated they had specified goals stated that their goal was to provide parenting information. The

researcher does not consider providing information to be a goal, but rather a means to achieve a goal.

Almost all (15 out of 16) newsletters were produced by cooperative extension agencies. Part of the mission of cooperative extension agencies is to "…promote informed decisionmaking by producers, families, communities, and other customers" (USDA web page, 1998). Therefore, one may conclude that providing research based parenting information is a practical goal of a cooperative extension agency.

For example, Delaware provided a fact sheet on its newsletter, *Great Beginnings*, which stated, "The mission is to help people improve the quality of their lives by providing research-based information and informal educational opportunities focused on individual, family and community needs." (University of Delaware Cooperative Extension, 1998). The same fact sheet discusses how their newsletters accomplish this mission by using customer evaluation feedback. The feedback indicated increased confidence as a result of the newsletter. Customer satisfaction evaluations have almost exclusively been used to measure newsletter results. However, as the literature review indicated, those evaluations have limitations. The most common limitations are 1) skewed responses because only those who benefit respond to surveys and 2) actual behavior change versus reported.

Wisconsin's *Parenting the First Year*, indicated that one of its goals was to prevent child abuse and neglect. The organization backed up this goal with a report that indicated the "…newsletter caused parents to strike their babies less often" (Riley, 1996). This finding was based on customer evaluation, so it too has limitations. However, it appears that Wisconsin at least has focused on a goal of reducing child abuse, and has used the newsletter as a means to achieve that goal. Dr. David Riley suggested that most people who distribute instructional newsletters for parents think that providing information to parents is a useful goal, but in reality it is a means to an end. According to Riley, there is an assumption that information alone has an impact upon childrearing.

Some parenting newsletters may be goals themselves. North *Carolina's Parenting Education Network* newsletter is a goal realized by North Carolina Parenting

Education Network (NCPEN). NCPEN's mission is to "facilitate statewide linkages among parents and other partners to encourage positive parenting practices." The newsletter is one vehicle they use to accomplish their mission. The same holds true for Oklahoma's Healthy Families American program. The program fact sheet list four goals: identify overburdened families in need of support; enhance family functioning; promote positive parent-child interaction, promote healthy childhood growth and development. Oklahoma uses *Parent Express* newsletter as one strategy to help achieve their goals.

Table 4.5 Organizational Goals			
Specified goals for newsletter *survey instrument Q. 11*	Texas Tots Newsletter	Frequency	Percent Distribution (N=16)
• newsletter has specified goals	yes	6	37.5%
• newsletters specified goals are vague		9	56.2%
• newsletter does not have specified goals		1	6.3%
TOTAL		16	100%

Although fifteen of the 16 respondents indicated that they had organizational goals, only six of those respondents offered what the researcher interpreted as goals—not means to achieve those goals.

State and local governments often compete for resources (budget, clients, legal framework). Those organizations lacking an understanding of their mission will eventually be eliminated either by public or private competitors, or by their own boards who no longer understand their usefulness. Newsletter organizations should make a compelling argument as to why their publications are valuable.

Goals are often difficult to measure. Reducing child abuse and neglect, for example, seems almost impossible for a newsletter to have as a goal. There are so many other outside factors that influence child abuse. However, Wisconsin demonstrated how its newsletter could reduce abuse. Wisconsin used an experimental design complete

with control and experimental, pre-treatment and post-treatment parameters. Wisconsin found a legitimate measurement to justify their newsletter's effectiveness.

Survey and content analysis revealed that newsletters often met the ideal. However, there were a few substantial areas such as resources and organizational goals where the ideal was not met. Moreover, the distribution category contains some possible modifications for the model. The following chapter presents a overall setting of the newsletter performance and makes recommendations.

Chapter V. Summary and Recommendations

Purpose

The general purpose of this chapter is to summarize the results with an overall picture of how the respondents faired with the practical ideal type. Contemplating the literature and survey results brought about modifications in the practical ideal type. These changes are noted most succinctly in Table 5. Finally, general conclusions are drawn about the current and future status of parenting newsletters.

Table 5. Overall Conclusions and Recommendations			
Categories	Ideal Type Requirements	Met Ideal Type	Recommendations
Research based articles	All or almost all articles used research sources	25%	Greater use of journal articles, textbook chapters; refrain from infusing value judgements; update articles to reflect new findings.
Aged-paced distribution	Distribute newsletters based on age of child using prenatal, infant and 2 and 3 year old series	25%	Focus on developing a complete prenatal series to increase likelihood of fully developed infant; continue age-paced format.
Production Category • readability	Readability: use formulas or other type of scrutiny to ensure comprehension by majority of population	87.5%	Rely on at least two different methods to ensure comprehension. E.g. Formulas coupled with editorial review or pilot group.
Production Category • visual art	Uses photographs or sketches to depict visual demonstration	46.7%	Focus on visual demonstration as learning tool with either photos or sketches. Use clip art sparingly.
Production • attractiveness	Color is optional; uniform type; length of articles and format appropriate to newsletter standards	80%	Have outside review of newsletter to craft a final product. In house production okay if using external review.
Production • resource	Two are more sources provided on available resources included in sample.	40%	Each issue should include at least two sources of information for additional assistance.
Distribution • accessibility	all new parents statewide receive newsletter	in-conclusive results	Initial assumption that newsletters be distributed free to all parents is no longer part of the ideal type.
Distribution • retention	track expectant and new parents via AFDC databases or other similar database; include in hospitals new parent packets; include with social services	in-conclusive results	No recommendation.
Organizational Goals Category	Specifies goals that the newsletter hopes to accomplish	37.5%	Redefine goals to include results of providing parenting information. Use measurable results E.g reduce child abuse.

General Conclusions

After analyzing the results of the survey and newsletter samples, two general conclusions are made. The first conclusion is that parenting newsletters have been distributed for several years and appear to be a positive and effective tool for parents. The newsletters have common threads in their information, distribution, format and production characteristics. California's *Parent Express* and Wisconsin's *Parenting*

the First Year have provided a high quality model that have been and continue to be copied by other states.

The finished product varies from state to state. Product variance is most likely due to levels of support driving the production. Levels of support include the perceived value an organization has of the newsletter, the support given by its constituency, and levels of monetary support. Using a model already developed is a practical and efficient use of public resources. However, it can also lead to a devaluation of the importance of a parenting newsletter--hence the second general conclusion.

The surveys and newsletter samples revealed an important, yet intangible consequence—that of ambiguous goals. Parenting newsletter organizations which focus on how their newsletters can fit into the overall societal framework to reduce societal ills such as child abuse, accidents, premature births or increase parenting confidence and normal childhood development should also seek to correlate the newsletter and its results. Using newsletters as a measurable tool to achieve such lofty goals will draw support of public leaders, academicians, child development specialists, and the community at large. These segments of the population will value the newsletter because its unique communication serves as a vehicle to reduce many of the unwanted ills of society and increase those desirable qualities of society—strong families.

All 16 of the newsletters surveyed may indeed be contributing to those societal goals with their current newsletter framework. However, a majority of the respondents provided obscure goals for their newsletter. Without clear goals the newsletter may be regarded as superfluous by those who fail to see the value in the newsletter. Moreover, without a clear goal, organizations may lose focus on the importance of distributing newsletters to every parent in the state, or the necessity of providing additional resources to those parents seeking assistance.

Texas Tots is one such newsletter that was adapted from *Parent Express*. *Parent Express* appeared to be the catalyst *and* springboard for *Texas Tots* origins. The tables in the results chapter contained a column specifically for *Texas Tots* newsletter. The distinction provided the researcher a clear way to compare *Texas Tots* with other parenting newsletters and with the practical ideal type. In all categories except for the

research based articles category, *Texas Tots* met the practical ideal type. The goal of Foundation for New Texas'(FNT) is to reduce the increasing number of child abuse cases in Texas. FNT held that parenting education is the best avenue in child abuse prevention. *Texas Tots* has four strategies that will progress toward this goal. Those strategies include making *Texas Tots* into a video series and establishing a question and answer line for subscribers. These strategies transcend newsletter communication.

Positive parenting practices are on the rise. In 1997 the National Center for Health Statistics reported a positive outlook for the nation's children:

> Fewer children are uncertain about where their next meal is coming from, more are being read to by their parents, and an increasing percent of children are being enrolled in early childhood education programs and graduating college. In addition, there has been an increase in childhood immunizations rates and a decrease in infant and child mortality (National Center for Health Statistics, 1997).

Parenting education has been an powerful contributor to the success of American families. However, with the recent national attention focused on arguments made by Harris' book *The Nurture Assumption*, the future of parenting education may encounter some drastic changes. Newsletters may or may not be included in those changes. It is up to each organization to make a compelling case for the value of their newsletter.

Chapter VI. Appendices

Appendix A. Coding Sheet

Category	Source of Evidence	Variable Measure
Age paced distribution		
birth to 12 months	content analysis	yes/no
prenatal	content analysis	yes/no
13-24 months	content analysis	yes/no
25-36 months	content analysis	yes/no
Production		
pictures	content analysis	yes/no
attractiveness	content analysis	
color	content analysis	yes/no
professional. typeface	content analysis	yes/no
visual aesthetics	content analysis	yes/no
resource for readers	content analysis	yes/no

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Appendix B. Survey Letter and Instrument

September 14, 1998

«Title» «FirstName» «LastName»
«JobTitle»
«Company»
«Address1»
«Address2»
«City», «State» «PostalCode»

Dear «Title» «LastName»:

I am conducting a survey about parenting newsletters that primarily target parents of children ages birth to three years. If your organization produces or distributes such a newsletter, I would appreciate your participation in this survey.

The information you provide will be used to assess available parenting newsletters nationwide for an applied research project at Southwest Texas State University's Masters Program in Public Administration. If you would like a copy of the final report on the project, please check the appropriate box on the survey.

Please mail the completed survey and a recent copy of your organization's newsletter to me by September 30, 1998.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important project. If you would like to reach me to discuss this matter, please phone me at 207/824-0990 or e-mail me at tchaney@bdc.bethel.me.us.

Sincerely,

Terri Chaney
P.O. Box 18
Newry, ME 04261

enclosures

Parenting Newsletter Survey

Newsletter Name:	
Contact Person:	
Phone No.	E-mail:
Mailing Address:	
Check "yes" if you would like a copy of the final report. Yes , please send a copy.	

1. If we picked two or three articles on general parenting information (e.g. medical requirements, feeding schedules) at random from your newsletter, and asked you where you got the information to write the articles, which of the following would you check?

    Please check box where appropriate

    a. journal articles reporting original research
    b. book chapters summarizing research findings
    c. books containing "how to" advice for parents
    d. other newsletters or pamphlets with advice for parents
    e. your own experience
    f. other, explain _____

2. a. Is your newsletter paced according to the age of the child?   Yes   No
       If yes, does your newsletter currently offer:
    b. infant series (birth through 12 months)   Yes   No
    c. prenatal series (3 months prior to birth)   Yes   No
    d. toddler series (13-24 months)   Yes   No
    e. toddler series (25-36 months)   Yes   No

3. If you answered no to question 2a, is your newsletter topically based?   Yes   No
   Other, explain _____

4 a. Do you use readability tests when writing the articles?   Yes   No
   b. If yes, which test is used (e.g. Flesch) _____
   c. If yes, at what reading level to you generally target?_____

5. Describe your target audience. *Check only one response.*
       Medicaid eligible
       All first-time parents statewide
       All parents statewide
       No target audience
       Other, Please explain

✴ please turn over ✴

6. Do you charge a fee for a subscription? *Check only one response.*
    Yes, except for those who are Medicaid eligible
    Yes, all subscribers must pay a fee
    No, newsletters are free to all subscribers
    Other, Please explain

    _____

    _____

7. If you do charge any fee, do you consider this an inhibiting factor in   Yes   No
   expanding your readership?

8. Is your newsletter available to other organizations for distribution?   Yes   No

9. Do you maintain a database that allows you to:
    obtain names of new parents or parents-to-be?
    update address changes?
    We have no maintained database

10. Does your newsletter regularly feature a change of address box for parents to   Yes   No
    complete if they move?

11. Does your organization have specified goals for its newsletter?   Yes   No

12. If you answered yes to Question 11, please state your specified goals. *(You may
    include printed information concerning organizational goals instead of completing this question.)*

    _____

    _____

    _____

<div align="center">

✻ *end of survey* ✻

</div>

Important completion instructions.

1. Please include a **recent copy of a newsletter** and any **additional information or reports** that contain your organization's specified goals for its newsletter. A newsletter sample is necessary in order for your contribution to be complete.

2. For your convenience, a self-addressed envelope is provided to return the survey.

3. Please mail survey by **September 30, 1998**.

Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Terri Chaney
P.O. Box 18   Newry, ME 04261
                                               e-mail: tchaney@bdc.bethel.me.us

Appendix C. Organizations Participating in the Survey

Arizona
Shirley Obrien
School Begins At Birth
Forbes 301
Tucson, AZ 85750
ph: 520/621-7145
sobrien@ag.Arizona.edu

Delaware
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Great Beginnings
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University of Delaware
Newark, DE 19717-1303
ph: 302/831-1329
ptnelson@udel.edu

Georgia
Don Bower
Baby Bouncer
Cooperative Extension
Hoke Smith Annex
University Georgia-Athens
Athens, GA 30602
ph: 706/542-7566
dbower@uga.edu

Maine
Dr. Judith Graham Colburn
The Growing Years
5717 Corbett Hall, Rm 314
Orono, ME 04469-5717
ph: 207/581-3104
jcolburn@umce.umext.maine.edu

Mississippi
Dr. Louise E. Davis
ABC's of Young Children
Box 9745
MS State, MS 39762
ph: 601/325-3083
louised@humansci.msstate.edu

Nebraska
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The Ups & Downs of Adolescence
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ph: 402/472-3098
srussell@unlvm.unl.edu

North Carolina
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Parent Connections
Box 7605 NC State
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ph: 919/515-9147
Karen_DeBord@NCSU.edu

New Hampshire
Dr. Mary Temke
Cradle Crier
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Durham, NH 03824
ph: 603-862-2493
mary.temke@unh.edu

New Mexico
Dr. Diana DelCampo
Baby's First Wish
Box 30003, Dept. 3AE
Las Cruces, NM 88003-0003
ph: 505/646-6031
ddelcamp@nmsu.edu

Ohio
Kim Whaley
Positive Parenting
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Columbus, OH 43210
ph: 614/292-5733
whaley.7@osu.edu

Oklahoma
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Parent Express
237 HES - OSU
Stillwater, OK 74078
ph: 405/744-6231

Oregon
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Parenting the First Year
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Corvallis, OR 97331-5106
ph: 541/737-6121
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Rhode Island
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Children, Youth & Families
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Texas
Texas Tots
P.O. Box 4800
Austin, TX 78765
ph: 512/424-6808

Washington
Dr. K.E. Barber
Young Parent
Dept. of Human Development
WSU
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barber@mail.wsu.edu

Wisconsin
Dr. David Riley
Parenting the First Year
1300 Linden Dr.
University of Wisconsin
Madison, WI 53706
ph: 608/262-3314
dariley@facstaff.wisc.edu

Note: Connecticut provided a survey and excellent newsletter, *All Children Considered*, which targets child care providers. The information was not used but participation is appreciated.

Appendix D. Reactions to *The Nurture Assumption*

Dr. William Sears, pediatrician

Upon reviewing *The Nurture Assumption*, Dr. William Sears, renowned pediatrician and child development specialist states that "A baby builds trust in his parents when they respond to his cries and cues ....[and that]...studies have found that the single most important influence o a child's emotional health is how he is parented early on" (Sears, 1998). Sears argues that the prevailing belief by child development experts is that "genes, parents, peers and to a lesser extent, fate determine a child's identity" (Sears, 1998). Hence, Sears agrees with Harris, as do many child development specialists, that peers play an important role in shaping the child's personality. However, Sears parts with Harris on the amount of influence by peers. He explains a converse relationship in the parental versus peer influence.

> ...if a child is solidly grounded in his parents' values, then his peers opinions will not influence him as strongly—though at times it may seem to parents that peers prevail. Conversely, a child who is not grounded in his parents' values will drift with the tides of popular opinion, like a ship that has no rudder." (Sears, 1998).

Time Magazine, October 18, 1998

> *Time Magazine's cover story on the October 18, 1998 issue was "How to Make Your Kid a Better Student" with the tag "Yes, parents matter. Here's how." Time Magazine highlighted the accomplishments of seven children and explored theories on intelligence and gender difference in its special report. The article promoted the popular argument that parents do matter with regard to their lasting influence on children. Yet, the article also supported Harris' arguments, by infusing the importance of peers and genetic make-up. The following is a summary of the article.*

Parenting is important: Educators on the whole disagree with the claims found in Judith Rich Harris' book *The Nurture Assumption*. They find that those students who are high academic achievers are usually backed by parents who care and are involved in their child's lives. "Good students tend to have what teachers call a broad fund of

knowledge. They've been taken places; they've seen a bit of the world. Knowledge of the world is most often a gift given to them by their parents" (Wallis, 1998: 81).

Children who come from abused or neglected homes may be at risk for learning disabilities. "If they're not getting the nurturing they need in the earliest years, their synaptic development shuts down, which in turn shuts down the foundations for learning and being a human being," Matthew Melmed, Executive Director of Zero to Three (Cole, 1998: 89). Dr. Bruce Perry of Houston's Baylor College of Medicine found that children who lack nurturing via play and touch develop smaller brains, 20% to 50% smaller than normal children. Craig Ramey, cognitive neurosceintist, University of Alabama Children of mothers who experience depression, usually prolonged bouts of depression, are also victims of reduced brain activity.

Peers are Important. Most outstanding students have an outstanding teacher or someone else who connected with them. In another study conducted in 1997 by Columbia University, one hundred prominent Americans aged 40-55 were found to have mentors in their backgrounds. Especially those Americans who came from disadvantaged backgrounds. "Sometimes a caring teacher served 'as a parent substitute," says Charles Harrington, who co-directed the study. (Wallis, 1998: 85).

Genetics are important. Some students are gifted with long attention spans, time management skills and organization. "Kids blessed with these qualities may have a natural advantage over kids who have to struggle to keep order—although those who keep up the struggle will ultimately develop persistence, the most valuable trait a student can have."

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