"They Won’t Come":
Increasing Parent Involvement in
Parent Management Training Programs
for At-Risk Youths in Schools

Philip M. Ouellette and David Wilkerson

The absence of parents from schools is seen as an important factor related to
the significant number of adolescents at risk of school failure. Effective par-
enting is known to be a key protective factor for adolescents at risk for school
failure and other maladaptive developmental outcomes. While evidence-based
parent management training models exist, their use has been limited by prob-
lems regarding recruitment and retention when services are offered through
traditional means. We review the literature on parent involvement in schools,
the effectiveness of parent education programs, and mutual aid activities.
Logistical barriers to parent participation in parent management training pro-
grams and other school-related activities are examined, and a strategy using
twenty-first-century technology will be described as a means to increase par-
ent involvement in schools.

Keywords: at-risk youths; mutual aid; parent involvement; parent manage-
ment training; school failure; technology-supported strategy

“They won’t come” is a summary statement that we often hear from
teachers, school administrators, and school social workers regarding
their efforts to increase parent and family involvement in parent man-
agement training programs and school-related activities. The absence of

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parents and other family members from schools is seen as one important factor in the significant number of adolescents who are at risk of school failure (Engvall, 2002; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Parent and family involvement in schools supports achievement and school completion and has taken on increasing importance as we learn more about the consequences of school failure.

This article describes a strategy that uses contemporary technology to increase parent and family participation in parent management training programs and in collateral mutual aid support groups for families of at-risk youths in schools. The significance of parental involvement in schools and barriers to parent and family participation in parent management training are examined. Possible avenues of additional research and implications for social work practice in schools are discussed.

**Literature Review**

**Consequences of School Failure and Parental Absence from Schools**

Negative outcomes associated with school failure have included unwanted pregnancy, poor mental health, alcohol and substance abuse, criminality, incarceration, underemployment, unemployment, and increased rates of mortality (Richman, Bowen, & Woolley, 2004). Only 6 percent of blacks ages twenty to twenty-three with at least a bachelor's degree were unemployed in 2000, compared to 32 percent of blacks who did not graduate from high school. For adults, death rates have been two-and-a-half times higher for those with fewer than twelve years of education than for those with thirteen or more years; compared to high achievers, low academic achievers are twice as likely to become parents by their senior year of high school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003). In addition to individual consequences of risk, collectively, at-risk adolescents are responsible for numerous social and economic costs associated with welfare supports, criminal justice costs, and social programs, the costs of which have been estimated to run into the billions of dollars (Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003).

Parenting is a resource that moderates students' school behaviors such as attendance and classroom compliance (Hill, Catellino, Lansford, Nowlin, Dodge, Bates, & Petit, 2004) as well as academic achievement and graduation (Fan, 2001; Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Gregory & Weinstein, 2004). Effects have been seen to operate along two primary pathways, the first being that of supervision or regulation, and the second being that of support or nurturance. Research on family involvement in urban schools has found that parents of low socioeconomic status and minority urban parents who are involved in schools have been responsive
to services that provide them with opportunities to maintain or enhance their parenting capacity (Howland, Anderson, Smile, & Abbott, 2006).

However, as schools increasingly fail to reach achievement and graduation benchmarks under the No Child Left Behind Act, it appears that the resource of parental involvement in education is not being actively supported prior to school failure (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003). Few studies in the dropout prevention research focus on families as the primary focus of intervention. Only one study conducted between 1980 and 2001 focusing on parenting children in middle and high school was found (Lehr et al., 2003). Parent management training groups that focused on school behaviors were reported as uncommon in schools (Valdez, Carlson, & Zanger, 2005). The most prevalent practice has been centered on youth-focused or school-based interventions, as opposed to parent- or family-focused interventions (Wilkerson & Ouellette, 2005). There are several reasons for this phenomenon, including pragmatic factors such as accessibility of services, cost, time, and space constraints for involving families (Kumpfer, 1999). Research consistently documents the lack of parent involvement in school-based parent management training programs, most especially at the high school level (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003).

It is teachers' perception that their involvement with parents has also been minimal. For the most part, teachers reported they only saw parents at twice-yearly parent-teacher conferences (Baker, 1997). Some have suggested that high school teachers' minimal encouragement of parent involvement extends beyond concerns about the capacity of parents to help to beliefs about the culpability of parents for poor student performance (DeCarvalho, 2001: Nakagawa, 2000). Some studies have found that teachers who blamed parents for their students' underachievement did so as a result of their lowered expectations, their negative beliefs, and their own personal biases against students and families of lower socioeconomic status (Thompson, Warren, & Carter, 2004).

Schools have used various methods to encourage parental involvement in school activities and programs. These have included school-wide meetings, open houses, and parent-teacher contact through notes, telephone calls, e-mail, and conferences. Other strategies have included the provision of opportunities for parents to engage in meaningful supportive roles, for example, as classroom volunteer assistants or field trip monitors (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003). Despite these attempts, poor communication between school representatives and parents continues to be pervasive. Strategies commonly used to engage parents in schools have often led to disappointing results (Halsey, 2005; Ouellette, Briscoe, & Tyson, 2004).
Parent Management Training Programs

Problems of at-risk adolescents have been categorized into groups such as various mental health problems; violence; use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs; poor diet; sexual activity; and school failure. Parent management training programs are one type of family-focused intervention used to respond to the needs of at-risk youths and their families. Parent management training programs are typically six- to eight-week training sessions where a small group of parents meets weekly with a group facilitator to discuss issues of behavior management, parent-child communication, and family relationships. There is ample evidence that parent management training programs are effective for dealing with a wide range of the behaviors of at-risk children and adolescents and associated mental health disorders (Lundahl, Heather, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2005; Maughn, Christiansen, Jenson, Olympia, & Clark, 2005; Olfson, Gameroff, Marcus, & Jensen, 2003; Scott, 2005), disturbances in school achievement and adaptation (Shepard & Carlson, 2003; Valdez et al., 2005), and suicide risk (Toumbourou & Gregg, 2002). Parent management training programs have also been found to improve maternal psychosocial health (Barlow & Coren, 2003) as well as improve boys' behavioral adjustment in households headed by a single mother following their parents' divorce (Martinez & Forgatch, 2001).

Parent management training has also been seen to increase parenting management capacity for at-risk families and their adolescent children. For example, Scott (2005) found that minority and single-parent families and families of lower socioeconomic status participating in behavioral parent training groups experienced reduced child antisocial behavior compared to a wait-list control group, and that the effects were sustained at follow-up. When parent management training is school based, it has been identified as a potentially stabilizing influence that increases resilience for school success (Richman et al., 2004).

Barriers to Involving Parents in Parent Management Training Programs

Despite the evidence of the effectiveness of parent management training programs, barriers to involving parents in parent management training programs prevail. Problems with recruitment and retention have been identified as major obstacles to parent participation, due to difficulties associated with accessibility, child care, distance, sociocultural stigma, time, and parents' perceptions of the social and professional status of educators and of family education trainers (Gross, Julion, & Fogg, 2001). When parents have been successfully recruited for
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parent management training groups, effectiveness has been limited by attrition, with as many as half of participating families failing to complete training programs (Flaherty, 1999).

Numerous variables appear to adversely affect retention. These include family factors such as parent stress, parent pathology, and the severity of the child’s problem, as well as other factors such as failure to attend to adult-level issues, trainer effectiveness, scheduling, accessibility, distance, and child care issues (Buchanan, 2005). Differences between parents’ and school staff’s ethnicity and income levels have been seen to limit retention (Lightfoot, 2004).

A wide range of responses to these barriers has been identified. These have included increasing families’ accessibility to programs by offering training programs in community and school-based locations (Cunningham, Bremner, & Secord-Gilbert, 1993), attending to cultural and context relevance (Gross & Grady, 2002; Martinez & Eddy, 2005), attending to engagement processes by initiating pre-group home visits (Dishion & Kavanaugh, 2003), providing incentives for participation (Gross et al., 2001; McCurdy & Daro, 2001), and including parents as resources for collaboration in designing training content (Shepard & Carlson, 2003).

Solutions recommended for increasing retention have included increasing training effectiveness by contacting parents by telephone between group meetings (Dishion & Kavanaugh, 2003), providing child care services during the training sessions, and using input from parents to better understand parent preferences across a range of factors, including travel distance, time and day, session content, and trainer qualifications (Buchanan, 2005). Empowerment approaches have also been recommended to shift the process of training from one that is expert driven and hierarchical to one that is collaborative and more egalitarian (Wilkerson & Ouellette, 2005). Other strategies include engaging parents in problem solving and arriving at guided solutions, as opposed to giving parents a prescribed solution to master (Cunningham, Davis, Bremner, Dunn, & Rzasa, 1993). Another strategy is to engage parents’ help with setting the training agenda in early sessions (Dishion & Kavanaugh, 2003).

Mutual Aid Strategies

A collateral approach to the problems of attrition in parent management training that may hold some promise is mutual aid and self-help groups. The process and activity of mutual aid has been associated with positive psychological and physical health, adaptive coping, and problem
solving (Davison, Pennebaker, & Dickerson, 2000; Wituk, Shepherd, Slavich, Warren, & Meissen, 2000). Sheldon (2002) found that parental involvement at school increased when parents were members of informal social networks that included other parents who had children attending the same school.

In a systematic review of the qualitative research of formal and informal support systems of parents receiving welfare support, Attree (2005) found that single mothers perceived themselves as less supported in child care than married parents and they were more reliant on nonfamily support networks. The use of formal supports was limited by parents' lack of knowledge regarding their availability and parents' concerns about being perceived as inadequate. Mutual aid and self-help groups for single mothers whose children are at risk for out-of-home placements due to neglect and abuse were also found to be effective (Cameron, 2002).

In conclusion, parent management training programs and mutual aid and self-help groups are seen as viable ways to increase the capacity of parents to respond to a wide range of problems associated with at-risk youths in schools (Davison et al., 2000; Shepard & Carlson, 2003; Valdez et al., 2005; Wituk et al., 2000). The challenge for school social workers, educators, and human service professionals is then how to implement and/or facilitate these programs in ways that reduce the logistical barriers many families face. This often means holding face-to-face group meetings at a time and place convenient for all participants. Perhaps the time has come for us to consider how we might use today's technology to expand our capacity to reach out to the parents and families of at-risk youths. The use of technology to deliver these services would directly confront difficulties associated with transportation, time constraints, lack of space for face-to-face meetings, and the distance parents have to travel to attend meetings. What follows is a description of how school social workers and teachers might use today's technology to facilitate the involvement of parents in parent management training programs and mutual aid support groups.

**Increasing Parental Involvement through Technology**

The biggest change created by globalization has been the technological revolution. We currently have a new generation of parents and youths who are well versed in the use of computer technology and advanced communication networks, including the Internet, cell phones, e-mail, instant messaging, and chat rooms. Technological advances in recent years have revolutionized the way we communicate with each
other, the way we get new information, and even the way we learn. The continued integration of technology in our society will ultimately affect all aspects of our everyday lives, making access to new information, resources, and support more effective, more widespread, and less expensive.

The use of technology is emerging as one way to increase parent involvement in schools. For example, Internet delivery of social support and mutual aid has been a growing phenomenon whose appeal is evidenced by the number of participants seeking mutual aid for a wide range of psychological and physical problems (Kyrouz, Humphreys, & Loomis, 2002). While there have been concerns about a digital divide based on education and income, a parenting Web site was seen as effective for single mothers, 68 percent of whom had average or below average income levels (Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005). Currently, schools have begun to use technology to enhance parental monitoring of academic performance through Web-based grade books. The idea of using technology to enhance parent-school and community partnerships is not new and has already been suggested as a possible strategy (Ouellette, 2002).

With the continued enhancement of course management software systems, improved access to broadband computer networks, and the creative use of a number of new multimedia tools such as flash animation, streaming video, Web-based audiovisual presentations, and desktop videoconferencing technology, we now have the ability to reach out to parents and families in ways not possible just a few years ago. If we can bring educational opportunities to students experiencing difficulties with issues of time and distance through the creative use of technology, it is conceivable that we could offer parent management training programming and mutual aid support services to parents and families experiencing similar barriers. However, the use of technology to address barriers of accessibility, child care, distance, stigma, and time has yet to be applied to synchronous and asynchronous parent management training programs.

A Pilot Project

A pilot project that incorporates the use of technology to deal with logistical barriers of recruitment and retention for parents involved in parent management training programs and mutual aid groups was recently developed. The aim of the project is to test the feasibility of using a technology-supported instructional environment as a way of offering
parent management training and creating a wireless telephone network as a strategy for self-help and mutual support. Although the project is still in the developmental and design phase, it will target a small group of volunteer parents whose adolescents attend inner-city middle and high schools within an urban school corporation. Table 1 displays the model that will be used for implementing the project. Desired outcomes for parents and youths for each strategy have been established.

Table 1. The Technology-Supported Parent Training and Mutual Aid Strategy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Parent Outcomes</th>
<th>Youth Outcomes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategy A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology supported parent management group training (desktop videoconferencing)</td>
<td>1. Increased retention in parent management</td>
<td>1. Improved academic performance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Increased capacity in parent management</td>
<td>2. Improved school behaviors</td>
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<td>3. Improved home behaviors</td>
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<td>Strategy B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mutual aid telephone network group</td>
<td>1. Increased retention in parent management</td>
<td>1. Improved academic performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Enlarged social network as a result of mutual aid telephone network</td>
<td>2. Improved school behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Increased parental perception of support</td>
<td>3. Improved home behaviors</td>
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Technology-Supported Parent Management Training

The parent management training group would be facilitated by a trained social work professional and delivered through the use of six weekly computer-based desktop videoconferencing sessions with a group of six parents. Desktop videoconferencing and interactive discussions are possible with the use of server-based software from Macromedia Breeze. This electronic platform allows a small group of parents and a professionally trained group facilitator (e.g., a school social worker) to come together from their homes using laptop computers and inexpensive web-cam digital cameras. Interactive communication between participants becomes possible via a regular DSL connection. Minimal computer skills would be required of participants. Each weekly videoconferencing meeting would last for approximately one hour. Sessions would follow a structured format, and flexibility would be built in to allow parents to actively participate in determining the training content and the sequencing of some of the topics being discussed. The basic structure of the training
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sessions is adapted from an empirically supported parent management training model, the community parent education program COPE (Cunningham et al., 1998), which used training methods to increase children's positive behavior, decrease noncompliance, manage aggression, and decrease coercive and harsh parental responses. The program used in the COPE model facilitates the development of self-efficacy and motivation through an attributional discussion method. In an attributional discussion, participants discuss and identify problems of concern to them and then determine solutions based on case examples of parenting difficulties. For example, this may involve viewing a video vignette of a father becoming angry over a broken object. The father threatens to retaliate by breaking one of his child's belongings. Discussion questions would emphasize self-reflection, self-efficacy, and self-control. For example, the facilitator may ask: "What would be the long-term outcome of solving children's problems with aggression like this father did?" The training strategies in the COPE model increase parent commitment to trying out new parent management strategies. This discussion process could be implemented through the use of desktop videoconferencing. This technology would allow for interactivity among the participants similar to the interactivity in a traditional face-to-face group training environment.

Wireless Telephone Network for Mutual Aid

In addition to the use of desktop videoconferencing, a mutual aid telephone support network would be implemented through the use of cell phone technology. Cell phones could be programmed specifically for the parents in the network and used to facilitate access between participants in their assigned group. The parents participating in the mutual aid telephone network would be asked to make at least two calls per week to group members and be available to receive at least two calls per week from other parents in their group. Parents in the network would have an opportunity to discuss issues brought up during the weekly videoconferencing sessions. The primary purpose for the use of the cell phone network would be to provide a forum for parents to informally engage in topics of interest to them regarding issues related to their at-risk children. Examples may include a spontaneous discussion of behavior management techniques or challenges with adolescent behavior both at home and at school. Survey questionnaires and structured interviews would be used to acquire information as to the frequency of their participation in the network and its usefulness.
Accessibility

To ensure that all participants in the project have access to the technology, all participating families who do not have a computer and/or Internet access will be provided with a laptop computer with the necessary software. In addition, DSL connectivity will be provided. For families who do not have telephones, cell phones with time-limited connectivity will be provided to all families who do not have access to telephones.

Recruitment of Participants

A number of at-risk students from two schools in two different school districts will be identified by the school social workers in close collaboration with teachers. Researchers have found that successful strategies to engage parents in school-related projects have included speaking to families on a one-to-one basis after school, asking participating parents to help in the recruitment of other parents, and providing parents with detailed reader-friendly information about the project (Samaras & Wilson, 1999). With this in mind, parents of at-risk youths identified by the school social worker and teachers will initially be contacted by telephone or visited at home. All potential participants will be interviewed on a one-to-one basis to determine their interest in voluntary participation. Once interest in voluntary participation has been determined, follow-up home visits will be used to provide parents with verbal orientation to the project as well as reader-friendly materials. In addition, training on the usage of computer desktop videoconferencing and how to access online supportive materials will be conducted at participants' homes. Once a basic orientation period has been completed, some participants will be encouraged to invite other parents at their school to participate in the project. The parent management training program will only begin after the recruitment and orientation period has been completed.

Eligibility

Eligibility criteria for participation in the pilot project are the following: (1) parents must have an adolescent enrolled in the school where the pilot project is being initiated, (2) parents must demonstrate residence within the school district for at least eighteen months prior to the start of the project, and (3) parents must provide written consent to participate and to permit researchers to administer questionnaires as well as to
examine and analyze data from teacher observations and school records about their children’s academic and behavioral performance during the life of the project.

It is hoped that parental involvement in parent management training programs will be enhanced through the use of technology as a means to deliver this service. As a result, parent involvement with schools could be strengthened in four important ways. The first is information sharing about the school, classroom, and teachers. The second is parental discussion of the value of education with children. The third is increasing parental supervision of academic performance (Sheldon, 2002). The fourth is enhancing hope. Hope is seen by some researchers to be positively correlated with parenting skills (Kashdan, Pelham, Lang, Hoza, Jacob, Jennings, et al., 2002). “Connecting an isolated parent with one or two other parents as a strategy to increase involvement at home or school may be a promising avenue for schools that desire greater connections with families” (Sheldon, 2002, p. 313).

The model proposed here could lead to support services and family life education opportunities being offered to parents facing multiple challenges. By providing access to the Internet to families from underserved communities and neighborhoods, the barriers of problems with child care, distance, stigma, and time could be reduced substantially. Integrating technology to deliver parent management training programs could ultimately serve to improve successful partnerships between parents, school social workers, and human service professionals. Although there is evidence that parent management training programs do contribute to positive outcomes for at-risk youths in schools, logistical barriers for parent involvement have not yet been adequately addressed. The creative use of technology for service delivery has the potential to build parents’ capacity to intervene with a wide variety of at-risk youth behaviors in schools and to significantly reduce the logistical barriers associated with traditional service delivery methods.

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