

Educating the Community About Family Education Centers

*Holly Grafton
Wilmington, Delaware*

A problem which confronts many established Family Education Centers (FEC) is developing a mechanism for educating the public about the services which are offered. The Wilmington (Delaware) FEC has developed a leaders packet to used for presentations, particularly at Parent Teacher Association meetings. As coordinator of this program, I seek volunteers from our membership to act as participants in these presentations. We have developed an ongoing approach that is based on having a pool of volunteers from which I can choose a group who are free on the evening speakers are requested by an organization. This eliminates the problem of many telephone calls to verify dates with organizations, and also places less of a time imposition on any one volunteer. A panel approach is used. Each panel follows a similar format, which is outlined in the leaders packet discussed later in this article. Members familiar enough with Adlerian principles to be comfortable sharing their experiences with others comprise the panel. The moderator is usually a veteran panel member and requires little training.

As coordinator of this program, I am responsible for contacting Parent Teacher Association program chairmen early in their planning year, usually in the spring immediately following the elections. A form letter has been devised which asks them to consider our program which we feel is of interest to all parents and teachers interested in understanding and improving child-parent, child-teacher, and parent-teacher relationships. A general description of the format of the panel is given. The letter also explains that the audience will receive pamphlets which help parents formulate questions for discussion with panel members, who are parents like themselves. It mentions that questions from the audience will be entertained and that the audience will be given information on how to become involved in study groups.

This method has been successful in gaining entree into schools which are unfamiliar with our approach. We are able to tell our story to groups of parents and teachers who would not normally come in contact with the FEC.

The leaders packet. The leaders packet includes (a) directions to the moderator, (b) a suggested introductory speech, (c) typed sheet of questions for secondary schools, quiz for parents for elementary schools, (d) hand-out materials, (e) critique of presentation form, (f) study group sign-up sheet.

Directions to the moderator includes some basic procedural information (allow time for questions from audience, etc.), impressions we don't want to leave with the group (that our method is easy or foolproof), impressions we want to leave with the group (we are parents helping parents). The introductory speech sample was developed by Diane Porter, and is reproduced in its entirety.

Good evening, and thank you for inviting us to your program. I'm going to make a few remarks about what the Family Education Center is and how it operates. I'll probably refer to it from here on simply as FEC. I'd like to begin with just a bit of our philosophy and then, to make it a real learning experience for all of us, we'd like to invite your questions for discussion with our panel members.

FEC's educational programs are based on the psychology of Alfred Adler. And, to quote from him, "the whole purpose of education at home and in school is to fit the child to take part in life with others . . . to work on the useful side of life, not on the useless side." In other words, to help a child become part of the solution instead of part of the problem in our society today.

We are a non-profit organization operated solely by volunteers. The main concern of FEC is to help people learn ways to improve relationships—with themselves, with their children, with their spouses and with all other people with whom they come in contact in their daily lives.

How do we go about achieving this ambitious goal? There are really a number of ways we approach it. Usually a person's first exposure to FEC is participation in a Parent Study Group. Since 1963, thousands of families and teachers have been involved in these groups in Wilmington, Newark, and surrounding areas. The groups are led by parents who have been in a group, found it helpful, and wish to share their learning with others.

Study groups deal with learning new principles of child raising, through reading and discussion of the book *Children: The Challenge* by Rudolf Dreikurs.

We run two counseling centers—Young Center at Lancaster School every Saturday and Statton Center at Downie School

on Thursday evenings. We do not provide psychiatric services—our counseling is educational in nature. At the Center, a specific family is interviewed by trained counselors who try to determine what difficulties in interpersonal relationships are contributing to behavior problems with children. This is group counseling and the audience is encouraged to participate from time to time.

You may not have considered it before, but parenting is about the only profession for which people receive no formal training. A teacher trains, a carpenter trains, a dentist trains, a bookkeeper trains, we take training or instructions to drive a car—but training to raise children? Some say “that’s ridiculous, child raising just comes naturally.” But does it? Especially in these times when our society is moving away from autocratic towards democratic leadership. Traditions regarding any aspect of our lives no longer have the impact they once had, and traditional child-raising methods are no exceptions. So what happens? Some parents use the authoritarian approach and DEMAND respect, dominate all decisions, keep all responsibility for themselves. Is this method effective? Not really, for when a parent says in words or by his attitude, “you do as I say ‘cause I’m the boss!” the child says in his words and/or his attitude, “No, I won’t and you can’t make me!”

Another approach is the permissive way—parents allow complete freedom, make and enforce no rules. This usually results in chaos. When these kids grow up they expect the world to grant them complete freedom, and this is impossible. These kids become our unhappy, non-contributing adults—often part of the problem in society, but not part of the solution.

So what does FEC offer that is so wonderful and different? It’s really quite simple. We deal with concepts which involve mutual respect, equality, how to encourage kids, how to stimulate self-discipline, and the understanding of human nature.

I would like to introduce the panel, who will try to give you a better insight into our approach by discussing some specific situations that have been problems for you.

After the panel introductions and discussion of questions from the audience the moderator wraps up the session by restating the main points which should be remembered:

1. We are an organization of parents helping parents.
2. We use an educational process to help improve family relationships.

3. The problems between parents and children are universal; they are the same regardless of social and economic status.

4. FEC can help people learn new ways to handle problem behavior.

5. Many times when parents change their approach to children things get a lot worse before they get better.

The audience is then given the opportunity to sign up for study groups.

The final responsibility of the moderator is to ask the program chairman to complete the evaluation form. Although we have found this to be a successful program, we are always looking for constructive criticism, and ways to improve our approach.

We have found that a systematic approach to educating others about the FEC results in many more requests for programs than we had when we relied on "word of mouth." Program chairmen are usually at a loss for speakers that will be of interest to a broad segment of the membership. By alerting them to the availability of our program we make their job easier and spread the word about the Family Education Centers.