On the importance of being engaging:

Keeping parents in the centre of parenting research, policy and practice

10th Annual Summer Institute: OISE

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My REALLY important background

- Started out, young SAH mother
  - Therapeutic Foster Home
  - Modeling parent behaviour-parents of foster children
  - Advocate and supporter of community intervention programs

The spiral down…

- Went from middle-class to welfare in 3 weeks
- Young mom
  - No jobs
  - No credentials
  - No opportunities

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- Social services consumer **HYPOCRITE**
  - Avoiding Agencies I supported before

- Not just embarrassment
  - Tangible reasons

The goal:

- Present another way of looking at engaging families:
  – Shake up complacency

- Be more 'critical' of activities/approaches

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Research on engaging parents:

- Non-engaging families usually don't engage in research either…

- Most research done on people who show up…

- Even when asked, don't always hear 'truth'

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Reasons people give…

Sure, I will come…

(Happens even to researchers…)
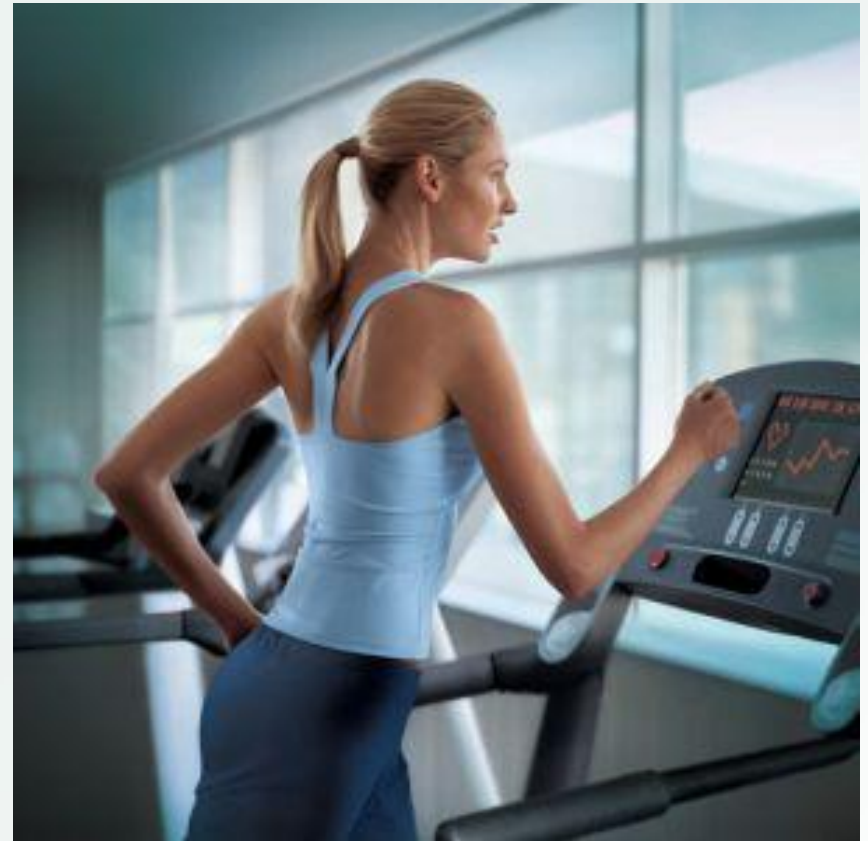
Reasons people give…

- I don't have time

Really???

- Average 28.8 hours of TV viewing

BEWARE of what Parents SAY!

- Discrepancies between what people SAY they want and what they actually will do

    – i.e., gym memberships?

Reasons people give…

- You won't often hear you are 'missing' the interest boat

- Power differential:
    - They are afraid to tell you
    - They are too nice

Big PROBLEM

- Assume the problem, assume the interest

- Use the same format
  - 'the parenting class/workshop/event

- Ignore 'adult education principles', empowerment approaches

- Parents don't come

- Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results
  - Albert Einstein (1979-1955)

What to do?????

- Think like a marketer

- NOT like a social service person…

Parenting Program Policy

- ## What is the focus?
  - Education, information?
  - *Fixing the 'broken' or 'flawed' parent?*

- ## What is the goal?
  - Behaviour change
  - *Identification of the problem?*
    - Did anyone ask the parents??

Do we understand our parents?

- What does your target group like to do?
  - What brings them joy?
  - What do they do with their children?

- What do they go out of their way for?
  - What do they never miss?
  - Where were the last few places they actually went (and want to go back again)?

They just wont come: The penalty of being irrelevant…

We tend to design programs that are a lot like school:

– Programs designed on workshop format

– Activities are not perceived as relevant to the target group

• Considered 'lame', 'silly' or 'irrelevant'

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They just wont come: The penalty of being irrelevant…

Too broad, not targeted
- – Hosted by people who don't understand the reality of parents

- – Boring or irrelevant, at least to the target group

Getting in the door

Incentives

- A warning sign – (marketing)
  - GOOD to encourage initial trial, but fail to deliver…

  - People MAY not getting the 'message'
    - Participation often ends when people acquire what they need/want
  - Not really there to hear the message
  - Incentives end – they won't come

When we fail to recruit…

- We tend to see this as 'their problem'

(why won't they attend? They must not care. They must not appreciate what is on offer)

When we fail to recruit…

- Trying to increase their motivation, instead of changing us!

  - Easier, in many respects to change *them* and not *us (at least, in our own minds)*

Establishing a connection

- Make sure you have a 'product' that is of value to your target group
  - Something THEY perceive as useful, meeting a need they have
  - Trial and error--acknowledge your 'misses', they are learning opportunities
- Best research: Parents are drawn to issues, interests, priorities

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Conclusion

Program Evaluation (assessing what you are doing)

- When people won't come, that is KEY information

    - failure of the message

- When people don't stay, ditto

    - Failure of the content to be useful

Assessment is necessary

- People's and community needs change over time

For more information…

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