



Connecting with Parents in the Early Years: Executive Summary

Communicating effectively with parents is a basic goal of early childhood programs. In recognition of the importance of strengthening the capacity of early learning programs to communicate effectively with parents, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation provided funding to the Early Childhood and Parenting (ECAP) Collaborative at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for a project titled “Connecting with Parents in the Early Years” to examine current perspectives on this topic. The project consisted of two principal parts: conducting a review of the relevant literature and convening a symposium comprised of parents and representatives from national organizations and early childhood programs, social work, the media, charitable foundations, research institutes, universities, and professional education programs. This group spent three days in late March 2003 at the University of Illinois’s Allerton Conference Center discussing the potential benefits and the challenges involved in increasing the effectiveness of communication between parents of young children and the staff of programs who serve them.

In preparation for the symposium, the ECAP staff prepared an interdisciplinary review of the literature on parent-program staff communication within the larger context of parent-staff relationships. As work on the project began, the staff became aware of the vast range of the literature related to parent-program relationships and the need to select a focus for both the symposium and the literature review. In view of the current national concern with helping young children become well prepared to enter school, the staff elected to focus on parent-staff connections that are directly or indirectly concerned with enhancement of children’s school readiness.

At the symposium, three speakers with extensive experience and expertise were invited to address this topic from a variety of perspectives. In addition to these major presentations, ample opportunities for discussion of closely related topics with panels of professionals and parents were built into the agenda.

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• The literature review includes studies analyzing parent-program relationships from four programmatic contexts: (1) programs and services for children who experience biological risks to their development, such as chronic or acute illness, injury, or disability; (2) programs and services for children considered “at risk” because of environmental factors such as poverty; (3) programs and services for typically developing children who are not considered subject to identified “risks”; and, finally, (4) programs and services for children in elementary and secondary schools that might provide useful and relevant perspectives for preschool programs.

• Although few of the studies located for this review were rigorously experimental, many offer insights and raise issues that contribute to dialogue in a field in which facts and conclusions based on experimental evidence are exceedingly difficult to obtain or are simply not available.

School Readiness and Vulnerability in Families

• An examination of the literature on school readiness reveals that children’s readiness to participate in formal schooling has long been recognized as important, although definitions of the concept of school readiness continue to vary widely. Policy makers, researchers, and practitioners have for a number of years been committed to the goal of readiness expressed in the 1994 “Goals 2000” legislation and, more recently, the “No Child Left Behind Act” of 2001.

• The foundation for the development of physical and cognitive competence is built in the early years and is clearly a major factor in school readiness. The role of parents, who are often referred to as “the child’s first teachers,” is important in fostering school readiness to the extent that parents dedicate a variety of resources to their child’s education. Literacy, in particular, has been a focal point for researchers investigating home influences on children’s academic achievement and adaptation to school. Recent literature related to school readiness has emphasized two other interrelated developmental domains in which it is reasonable to assume that parents and other early caregivers have the major role: the ability to regulate one’s emotions, or *self-regulation*, and the development of *social-emotional competence*.

• Given the major role of parents, the interrelationships between family poverty and stress can have a number of consequences for school readiness. Poverty and stress can profoundly affect a child’s social-emotional development in families rendered vulnerable by financial hardship, unemployment, disability, mental health problems, disruption through death or divorce, or other emotional and psychological difficulties. In the face of these challenges, of course, some families exhibit more resilience than others. The literature suggests that providing resources to vulnerable families of young children is urgent. If programs can help such parents address at least some of the challenges they face, family stress will be reduced, and the children may be more likely to be better prepared for school. Providing resources to vulnerable families also may reduce the possibility that these families become

isolated and less able to connect with programs that might help to address at least some of the challenges they face. Yet educators and service providers often experience difficulty in recruiting parents to take part in programs, and they face substantial challenges in keeping parents engaged with programs that are intended, directly or indirectly, to benefit their young children.

Programs Serving Young Children and Their Families

Over the past century, a variety of programs have been developed in which staff members work with parents toward the goals of enhancing their children’s growth and development—including parent cooperatives, Head Start, Early Head Start, HIPPIY, Parents As Teachers (PAT), Hawaii Healthy Start, or Healthy Families America. All of these widely applied programs include features that are meant to support effective communication between parents and staff. Reports of these programs frequently stressed the need for deeper understanding of (1) obstacles to recruitment and to the reduction of dropout rates in programs serving vulnerable families; (2) the extent, types, and intensity of parent participation (with special attention to participation demands that may be too difficult for some parents to meet); (3) the nature of parent meetings and how to make them more interesting and appealing to parents; (4) special concerns related to father involvement in such programs; (5) services that focus comprehensively on parents; and (6) the role and efficacy of home-visiting components.

Communicating with Parents

The exchange of information and other resources is a key component of the relationship between parents of young children and the staff of programs that serve them. Staff-parent communication practices are frequently addressed in the practitioner literature, but they are seldom studied systematically. Yet communication practices are recognized as indicators of the quality of services provided to parents of young children in both the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation materials.

Information seeking, defined here as a communicative activity through which individuals or groups try to “create a meaningful order of things,” is thus viewed as something that parents engage in within the varied contexts of their daily lives. For its theoretical framework, the discussion of information needs, information-seeking behaviors, information preferences, and information use draws heavily from Dervin’s (1999) sense-making theory, Savolainen’s (1995) ideas about everyday-life information seeking, and Chatman’s (1996) ideas on how the forces of power and authority in society strongly influence both those who provide information and those who use it.

Issues of information access are relevant to the ability of parents to acquire and to understand information intended to help their children get ready for school. Information science terminology can help early childhood educators “unpack” the problems related to information access. Information science researchers distinguish between *physical access to information* (which may

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be affected by geographic factors, sensory and physical disabilities, and programmatic characteristics, such as scheduling) and *intellectual access to information* (which depends on literacy levels of staff-parent interactions, of materials prepared for parents, and on the availability of home language materials for parents), and suggest that these concepts are central to any discussion of information access. *Information poverty*, another information science term, refers to a cluster of important problems related to information access. “Information-poor” individuals, for example, experience a generalized relative lack of information that might help them solve their problems and attend to the tasks of life. People who live in poverty are less likely to have access to the Internet, for example, a fact that gave rise to the concept of a “*digital divide*” between Internet users and people who for economic reasons remain not only technologically illiterate but also out of touch with the wealth of information on the Internet.

Social science researchers suggest that another way to think about the structures and processes of human communication is to examine *social networks*, or the patterns of relationships among individuals, groups, or organizations that permit or inhibit the exchange of resources, such as goods, services, social support, influence, and information. Using this concept to examine the resources that programs offer to parents (and that parents offer to programs) leads to the conclusion that, in general, parents and program personnel best serve children’s interests when they freely provide each other with information, identify problems and strengths within the family and the child, and decide together how best to employ their resources and support those strengths, with the goal of enhancing the child’s growth and development. Some of the current recommendations for good practice in parent-program communications include:

- Conveying mutual trust and respect
- Maintaining regular, two-way, meaningful communication between home and school
- Focusing on communication that is for “the good of the child”
- Recognizing the importance of partnerships between parents and programs
- Using a variety of connecting methods such as notices, phone calls, conferences, memos, conversations, and other venues
- Recognizing and working to overcome potential barriers to communication, such as language differences and/or low literacy
- Becoming familiar with the information needs and the patterns of information seeking and use in the community served

Relationships between Parents and Programs

Programs serving families of young children are generally considered “effective” when accountability measures indicate that they have directly or indirectly helped parents and children in areas related to school readiness. Effective communication between staff and parents, on the other hand, is more difficult to measure. A number of factors influence parent-staff

connections, including demographic variables; community characteristics and family mobility; and issues related to language and literacy, culture, class and classism, disabilities and “ableism,” gender, and sexuality. Characteristics of programs are also likely to influence relationships between staff and parents, as are parents’ and staff members’ individual experiences and traits. It is difficult, for example, for a program to serve parents who do not believe that participating will be useful to them; these parents are clearly among the “hard-to-serve” parents. Furthermore, parents who believe that participating in a particular program will be useful still may be unable to sustain their commitment because of external factors and stressors in their lives.

Two popular conceptions of the parent-program staff relationship—the partnership construct and the family centeredness concept—have arisen from concern for creating parent-staff relationships that reflect confidence in parents as agents of change and growth in their own lives and those of their children. Although these two perspectives differ in origin and in focus, they have in common an emphasis on parents’ responsibilities for determining the family’s life course and a belief in parents’ right to do so. Assumptions about family strengths and parents’ abilities to make decisions about family life strongly influence an organization’s policies related to parent-staff interactions, as well as how parents and professionals interact within a program’s social network.

Given the many potential differences between program staff and the parents they serve, the achievement of relational trust is an important but challenging part of parent-program relationships. Four components form the foundation for relational trust for both parents and staff: social respect, personal regard, perceived competence of the participants, and perceptions of basic integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Emerging Issues

Several emerging issues were identified in the literature review and reinforced by discussion at the symposium. These issues include:

The content of parent-program communication. As with any other group of information seekers, parents are likely to feel the strongest interest in content that they believe will be useful to them—that is, information with the potential to bridge a gap that they perceive in their knowledge (Dervin, 1999). In addition, program staff members need information from parents in order to be effective in their work with children and families.

Recruitment, retention, and commitment in programs serving families with young children. Comparatively little appears in the research regarding the variety of reasons behind a parent’s lack of participation in a program. The actual decisions parents may make that result in their being “hard to serve” are seldom addressed in discussions of how to foster relationships with them. As one example, evidence can be found in qualitative studies that language-minority parents want program personnel to understand that they are deeply concerned about and interested in their children’s school

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experiences, despite the frequent misperception that such parents are uninvolved and uninterested in them.

The nature and nurturing of program-parent relationships. Trust is considered fundamental to parent-professional relationships. Without it, parents are unlikely to be forthcoming about their own concerns and needs, and they will be unlikely to accept staff suggestions and implement strategies or behaviors that program staff members recommend.

The potential of comprehensive, integrated programs to connect with parents. Comprehensiveness of programs, an emerging issue, requires making resources available that address the widest possible range of family issues and problems. When services are integrated and comprehensive, they are connected by a common vision for providing services to families, and by careful planning and coordination on the part of the administrators and program staff.

Connecting the Threads

Future directions in research and practice are based on the literature review and upon the recommendations shared by the participants at the Allerton symposium in March.

Recommendations for researchers concerned with parent-program relationships include the following:

- Recommendation #1: Develop coherent, comprehensive, interdisciplinary research agendas for the study of connections between parents and programs that serve young children.
- Recommendation #2: Promote interdisciplinary understanding of parent-program relationships, using mixed research methods to approach complex questions and situations.
- Recommendation #3: Construct studies that “ask the right questions” and have the potential to evoke still more questions about parent-program relationships.
- Recommendation #4: Through critical literature review, including meta-analysis, increase interdisciplinary awareness of common challenges in studies on specific aspects of parent-program relationships.

Recommendations for practice and policy include the following:

- Recommendation #1: Programs working with parents of young children should put a high priority on creating a culture of mutual trust.
- Recommendation #2: Acknowledge that parents share responsibility for defining school readiness, and support parents’ efforts relative to their children’s readiness to begin school.

- Recommendation #3: Sustain the capacity of programs to work with parents effectively by allocating adequate resources.
- Recommendation #4: Take deliberate steps to strengthen the capacity of program staff to work effectively with parents.

Recommendations for charitable foundations and other concerned agencies include the following:

- Recommendation #1. Foundations can support the development of coherent, comprehensive, interdisciplinary research agendas for the study of connections between parents and the programs that serve young children.
- Recommendation #2. Foundations can provide substantial support for the development of research-driven tools to assist parents with helping their young children prepare to begin school.

Many approaches to parent-program connections have been developed, tried, and implemented over extended periods of time. Head Start, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, and HIPPY have served families for more than a generation, while Healthy Start America, AVANCE, MELD, and others have done so for more than a decade. Given the difficulties of conducting formal assessments of their long-term effectiveness, these and similar programs have been sufficiently successful with vulnerable families to earn continued support. The challenge remains for such programs to reach still more parents of young children who could benefit from the resources offered.

In addition to the literature review, this document includes three papers presented at the symposium. Each paper is followed by participant questions and a summary of a follow-up panel session.

The papers are:

- Powell, Douglas R. “Relations between Families and Early Childhood Programs.”
- Rodriguez, Gloria. “Connecting with Parents: The AVANCE Experience.”
- Moore, Evelyn, & Barbarin, Oscar A. “Respecting the Voices of Parents: How the Spirit of Excellence Parents Empowerment Project Connects with African American Parents” (presented by Wanda Roundtree Henderson and Rozita La Gorcé Green).

Summaries of two additional symposium panel discussions are also included. The first was a panel comprised of parents who had participated while their children were young in various programs represented at the symposium: HIPPY, AVANCE, MELD, and PAT. The other, the final panel discussion of the symposium, consisted of representatives from four discussion groups that

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had addressed how the various fields might take action to promote improved program-parent communication.

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Jean Mendoza
Lilian G. Katz
Anne S. Robertson
Dianne Rothenberg

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University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
College of Education
Early Childhood and Parenting Collaborative
Champaign, IL 61820-7469

Connecting with Parents: The AVANCE Experience

Gloria G. Rodriguez

The mission of AVANCE: *To build the confidence and competence of low-income parents and children in high-risk communities within a community context.*

Introduction

In preparation for the “Connecting with Parents in the Early Years” Symposium, a lengthy historical document was developed that described the agency’s goals, organizational structure, target population, funding, services, outcomes, characteristics of a successful program, and lessons learned in our replication effort. In 1985, AVANCE submitted to ERIC a similar document describing AVANCE’s 12-year evolution (Rodriguez, 1985). It was extremely interesting to see how much AVANCE has remained true to its mission these past 30 years and how much it has grown. The timing could not have been better for this paper, as AVANCE has been trying to take its proven model to cities throughout Texas and California without losing its quality. Replicating a successful, proven model to other cities without affecting AVANCE’s integrity and viability has not been easy. The most critical element of taking a program to scale is to truly understand what the mission, principles, and philosophy are, and to develop the infrastructure, policies, and procedures to safeguard them. Documenting where AVANCE was at 12 years—and again at 30—was extremely interesting and beneficial for the author. It was critical as AVANCE was trying to formulate what produced the positive outcomes in the early years and what needed to be safeguarded as AVANCE attempted to replicate AVANCE. While any program needs to adapt and respond to the needs of the community, there are those critical elements that are unique and critical to AVANCE, while also producing the successful outcomes of getting poor Latino children ready for school, of transforming lives, and strengthening families and communities in very poor communities.

The purpose of this paper is to describe AVANCE’s unique experience, including its proven model, outcomes, principles, and lessons learned in connecting with poor Latino parents. AVANCE has remained true to its original mission, philosophy, and target population.

AVANCE grew from a small community-based organization serving 30 low-income Latino individuals annually in the Mirasol Housing Project in San Antonio, Texas, in 1973, to a large service organization serving over 15,000 individuals annually in 11 cities and over 100 service sites in 2003. This paper describes AVANCE’s history, structure, target population, philosophy, services, model, evaluations, funding, and program modifications during the past 30 years.

prepared were learning concepts and readiness skills that they should have learned in their formative years, the children who had a stronger foundation were already learning more advanced skills and knowledge, and they continued to be ahead of the group of children who were not as well prepared to start school. The children may have progressed to the subsequent grade, but some would still be classified in the lower group, the labeling would continue, and they would never be able to catch up to the other children. Dr. Rodriguez felt frustrated as a teacher because she did not have control over the children's environment before and after they were in her class.

It was in a graduate research class that Dr. Rodriguez stumbled onto the new (at that time) concept of "parenting education." The concept was so logical: Education begins at birth (and even before), and the first and most important teacher is the parent, especially during the child's critical formative years from birth through age 4. Effective parenting is learned, and parents need assistance in carrying out this function and support to alleviate any obstacles that impede effective parenting.

Dr. Rodriguez conducted an attitudinal survey with the parents of the first group of children she taught to determine their attitudes on child rearing and their desire for parenting education. The parents' responses reflected a strong need and desire for a parenting program. Contrary to teachers' expectations, the responses showed that parents believed that learning begins at school; that the child's most important teacher is the first professional teacher the child will come in contact with, whether the child is in Head Start, kindergarten, or first grade; and that the basic role of the parent is to care for the children's physical needs. In addition, the parents held low academic aspirations for their children. When they were asked, "How far do you think your child will go in school?" most parents replied, "Probably the seventh grade." Most of the parents had only attained a seventh-grade education, and they did not think their children would go any further in formal education.

Research indicates that the child's formative years from birth through age 3 are critical in the development of a strong learning foundation, as well as in the development of important values and personality formation. Recent research findings in brain research, however, suggest that what the child experiences in the first three years of life sets the basic foundation for later learning and social relationships. Many parents, including those surveyed, did not realize the importance of their role as teachers of their children. Although all parents desire a better life for their children than they had, many feel that achieving such an outcome is beyond their control. In addition, many Hispanic parents have to deal with other difficulties, including a language and culture different from the mainstream, isolation, and immigration issues. Effective parenting in any situation is not easy, but it can be especially difficult for high-risk parents who often cope with social and economic stress.

Parents need training just as any other professional needs training. How parents choose to parent has largely been left to chance or to how they were

parented as children. The school system needs to reform and take aggressive action to restructure and assist parents of children under 3 so that children will enter school prepared to be successful. When the home and school work together, the high illiteracy rate and the disproportionately high dropout rate among Hispanics (up to 50% in some communities) can be reduced.

If we will have the home neglecting to carry out certain readiness activities, and the school assuming that the parents did their role in preparing the child for school, then in the end, the child will suffer. The child will be labeled, teased, and ignored until he can tolerate it no longer, and at about the seventh or eighth grade, he will drop out of school. In today's world, an education is critical in order to be part of the mainstream of society. Rather than having competent, independent, productive, contributing members of society, the home and school will have produced a group of children who will become isolated, dependent individuals who are at risk for such social problems as mental illness, family violence, crime, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, dropping out of school, and another generation of poverty.

Dr. Rodriguez felt then, as she feels now, that all parents need and desire support in their parenting role. Parents, especially poor, high-risk Hispanic parents, want and need assistance in strengthening the family unit and in helping their children realize their fullest potential.

In 1973, when Dr. Rodriguez was strongly committed to the philosophy of parenting education, the second AVANCE program was initiated in San Antonio, Texas, and she became the director. The first AVANCE program had been implemented in 1972 in Dallas, Texas, with a grant from the Zale Foundation that was submitted by two doctoral students of Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner from Cornell University: Bonnie Parks and Ann Willig.

Mission

The mission of AVANCE is to build the confidence and competence of poor parents and children in high-risk communities. AVANCE uses its Intervention Model for Hard-to-Reach Families and its Circular Model as a road map for providing preventive, comprehensive, continuous services for both parents and children within a community context. The AVANCE 0-3 Parent Child Education Program is the core of the intervention model.

In 1991, the AVANCE National Office was created to support the expansion of AVANCE to cities outside of San Antonio, Texas. AVANCE went through a long, arduous journey in attempting to develop an organizational structure whereby the National Office, its chapters, and its affiliates have the capacity to survive and flourish; its mission, philosophy, curriculum, programs, reputation, and assets are protected; its positive outcomes and quality standards are maintained; it can expand into new communities; and it can remain a premiere organization in providing early childhood, parenting, and family support services to low-income families, especially in Latino communities. AVANCE is one of the oldest and largest national parenting education and family

support models in the country. It has been evaluated; proven to work; and recognized widely by local, state, and national media, the philanthropic community, numerous documents and textbooks, and the White House (and is mentioned in three First Ladies' books).

Target Population

AVANCE serves predominantly low-income, Hispanic/Latino families throughout Texas (San Antonio; Houston; Rio Grande Valley; Dallas; Austin; Laredo; and Middle Rio Grande, which includes Eagle Pass and Del Rio; El Paso; Corpus Christi; and Waco) and in Los Angeles, California. AVANCE currently has a 5-year plan to expand to five sites in California. The primary participants and the starting point of intervention are the mother and her children under the age of 3, although some family centers also serve fathers. Services are provided in family centers located in schools, churches, houses, community centers, storefronts, and federally funded housing projects.

To qualify for the AVANCE core parenting program, families must have a child under 3 years of age and reside in the community, and the mother and/or father and child must participate. To be enrolled in the literacy and economic development components, parents must have completed the Parent Child Education Program. Although no fees are charged, families can contribute volunteer hours in clerical, craft, fund-raising, or child care assistance. Potential participants are introduced to the program by word of mouth and by a biannual door-to-door outreach effort. AVANCE accepts referrals from other service providers, such as from Child Protective and Regulatory Services.

2002 Demographic Data for the Core AVANCE Parent Child Education Program

Mexican American (third generation)	99%
Immigrant/first generation	69%
Spoke Spanish at home	67%
Dropped out of school	83%
Married or living with partner	70%
Annual incomes less than \$6,000	37%
Annual income less than \$15,000	73%
Median annual income	\$7,700
Mean age	28.9
Mean family size/people in household	4.5

AVANCE, Inc. Demographic Survey, 2002.

Since 1980, the populations served by AVANCE have been similar in their demographic characteristics. They are mostly poor Hispanics or Latinos. However in 1980, 93% of the population living in San Antonio was predominantly Mexican American, with the majority being third-generation Latinos.

As AVANCE expanded into other cities, the communities that it served and the people that attended the program became mainly first-generation Hispanics from Mexico, Central America, and South America (69%). A 1980 survey of the AVANCE catchment area indicated that 53.8% of the women were separated, widowed, divorced, or single. In 2002, the population that was surveyed was predominantly first-generation Latinos, reflecting a more stable family situation, with 70% reporting that they were married or living with a partner. Eighty-five percent of the respondents in 1980 reported having no occupation, and the remaining 15% held unskilled or semiskilled positions.

In 1980, the mean monthly income for the families surveyed was \$473.00, or \$5,676 annually. By 2002, 82% had incomes of less than \$15,000, with a median income of \$7,700. This change can be attributed to national policies regarding Welfare or TANF, or to the fact that first-generation Latinos, who cannot benefit from TANF, have multiple low-paying unskilled jobs. In 1980, the high school dropout rate was 77% among the parents, and in 2002, the rate of parents who had dropped out or never completed high school was 82%. The program serves two-parent families, single parents, teen parents, formerly AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) recipients, and high-risk and abused/neglected children. The family size, or participants living in the home, decreased from 6.1 members to 4.5 members over the last two decades. In 1980, the age of participants ranged from 15 to 69 with a mean age of 32; in 2002, the population got younger, with a mean age of 28.9 years.

Many of the parents surveyed were abused as children, lacked knowledge and skills related to child growth and development, had few support systems, and experienced continuous economic and social pressures. First-generation immigrants seemed more hopeful toward the future than third-generation Hispanics. They come to this country with hopes and dreams, but by the third generation, many lose their family strengths and their hopefulness toward the future.

Organizational Structure

AVANCE is a nonprofit organization. It is made up of a National Board, the national headquarters, and incorporated affiliates and unincorporated chapters, who are governed by their own local boards of directors. The AVANCE chapters and affiliates are perpetually linked to the National Office by an affiliation agreement, and all chapters and affiliates operate under one 501(c)3 designation. The National Board sets policy, direction, and guidance and is ultimately responsible for the preservation and protection of AVANCE's mission, philosophy, interests, and assets, as well as maintaining its favorable reputation and its unique commitment to strengthening and supporting low-income families and communities, especially in predominantly poor Latino communities. The National Board is the holder and protector of AVANCE's 501(c)3 IRS tax-exempt designation.

The National Office is the entity responsible for carrying out the policies, direction, and guidance of the board. It is also responsible for

- designing and developing programs, curriculum, products, and services in the name of AVANCE, Inc.;
- establishing and ensuring quality standards and developing the organization’s operations manuals;
- providing training, technical assistance, and support to AVANCE chapters and affiliates;
- conducting research and evaluation;
- coordinating and conducting joint fund-development efforts and raising funds at the state, regional, and national levels;
- promoting and marketing AVANCE’s mission, programs, and philosophy at the state, regional, and national levels;
- ensuring the operational integrity, viability, and growth of AVANCE, Inc.; and
- expanding AVANCE into new communities.

The AVANCE chapters and affiliates are the service arm for AVANCE, Inc., and serve as living laboratories for the National Office. The chapters and affiliates are responsible for providing high-quality AVANCE programs, beginning with the core birth to 3 parenting education program. When an AVANCE chapter increases its financial and organizational capacity and is able to meet certain criteria for incorporation, it can become an affiliate. The chapters and affiliates raise their funds locally and through joint efforts with the National Office. Affiliation fees are paid to the National Office for the use of the name, curriculum, programs, training and technical assistance, evaluation, research, marketing, and monitoring.

Services and the AVANCE Model

AVANCE chapters and affiliates are responsible for providing high-quality AVANCE programs, beginning with the core 0-3 parenting education program and following the AVANCE philosophy using the AVANCE Intervention Model for Hard-to-Reach Families, also known as the “Circular Model,” as a road map. The AVANCE model outlines a path for both parents and children that is intended to be preventive, comprehensive, community-based, and sequential, and that requires partnerships and collaborative initiatives. For AVANCE parents, the model may include opportunities to increase their educational level and/or improve their literacy and language skills, job training, parent leadership development, housing, and community development. For AVANCE children, the model may include opportunities to participate in preschool programs in the public schools, Head Start, or HIPPIY; recreational, mentoring, and educational activities in math, science, and computer training; and career development and scholarships.

Once the core AVANCE Parent Child Education Program is firmly established, local chapters can add AVANCE programs or services, such as the

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Guiding Principles of AVANCE Family Support and Education Programs

1. Believe that people need support and that people can and want to change.
2. Begin with the strengths that parents bring and the love parents have for their child(ren).
3. Be responsive to the needs of the community.
4. Stay family focused: serve all family members (AVANCE child, mother, father, siblings).
5. Focus on prevention: have AVANCE child under the age of 3 as the entry point for family participation in AVANCE and non-AVANCE programs and services and the foundation for all services.
6. Focus on predominantly low-income Latino communities.
7. Focus on communities/neighborhoods: Each AVANCE affiliate has a designated geographic service area (GSA) in which to provide AVANCE and non-AVANCE services. Each community/neighborhood within the GSA must include an AVANCE Parent Child Education Program as the core and foundation of all services.
8. Focus on strengthening the social support network of neighbor helping neighbor.
9. Conduct extensive outreach/door-to-door recruiting.
10. Transform lives—by rekindling the spirit of hope and motivation by getting to the soul and treating participants with dignity and respect, providing encouragement and support.
11. Hire people that graduate from the program as role models.
12. Provide supportive services: child care and transportation.
13. Use culturally relevant curriculum and activities.
14. Engage in public/private partnerships.
15. Be consistent with AVANCE’s mission, standards, and philosophy, yet adaptable to the community.
16. Follow the AVANCE Intervention Model for Hard-to-Reach Families, also known as the “Circular Model.” The AVANCE model outlines a road map for both parents and children, beginning with the core AVANCE Parent Child Education Program. Services are comprehensive, developmental, and sequential, and all programs complement the AVANCE Parent Child Education Program and are linked to public/private community agencies.
17. Services in the Circular Model include:
 - a. Core AVANCE Parent Child Education Program (parenting classes, toy making, community resources, home visits, child care, transportation, field trips, etc.).
 - b. Path for Children: AVANCE child care; Head Start; preschool; education with emphasis in math, science, computer skills, and reading; after school; tutoring; mentoring; and scholarships.
 - c. Path for Parents: Parenting (0-3 years–Adolescent); Literacy (English, GED, college), Personal Development, Leadership and Advocacy Skills, Career Awareness and Job Training, Employment, Housing, and Community Development.
 - d. Other AVANCE programs: Fatherhood, Marriage/Couple Program, Health Education, Family Child Care Training Program, Families Building Communities (Parents as Leaders and Advocates in the School and Society).
 - e. Examples of non-AVANCE programs and supplementary curriculum: I Am Your Child videos, Head Start, HIPPIY, educational literacy programs.

Families Building Communities, the Health Education Program, and the Family Day Home Provider Training Program.

AVANCE has the following separate programs/curriculum available for use by the affiliates for 2001-2003: (1) the core Parent Child Education Program (2) the Fatherhood Program, (3) Families Building Communities: Parents as Leaders and Advocates in the Schools and Society, (4) the Family Child Care Provider Training Program, (5) the Promotora Health Education Program, and (6) the child abuse prevention Homebound Program. In addition, AVANCE parents can attend literacy classes (English classes, GED, college) by partnering with local community resources. Some of the chapters operate Even Start Family Literacy Programs, Early Head Start, and Head Start.

Non-AVANCE programs, such as Head Start and Even Start, meet local community needs and complement AVANCE programs. They also contribute to the comprehensive developmental and sequential process for parents and children, as described in the AVANCE Intervention Model for Hard-to-Reach Families, so long as they do not duplicate or compete with AVANCE programs. Each affiliate operates in a designated geographic area. As the AVANCE chapters or affiliates expand services to a specific geographic community within the geographic service area, they include the AVANCE Parent Child Education Program as the core program and the entry point for family participation in other AVANCE programs and services. A fuller description of AVANCE's programs is provided below.

The Core AVANCE Parent Child Education Program for Parents and Children (0-3)

The Parent Child Education Program, AVANCE's core program, seeks to familiarize parents with the basic social, emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of young children in a practical and supportive manner. It also provides assistance, information, and support to parents for the purpose of alleviating problems and obstacles that may impede the improvement of effective parenting skills. The parents form their own social support network that provides sanctions for desirable behaviors. Parents attend weekly 3-hour center-based activities for 9 months. Classes are held between 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. daily, with each class consisting of approximately 15 mothers and 45 children.

The weekly classes include 27 bilingual lessons in child growth and development, and toy-making classes that emphasize learning through play. Special group field trips, picnics, and parties are planned for parents and children. For example, Halloween might be celebrated with a parade through the community in which mothers and children wear costumes and receive treats. At Thanksgiving, parents bring food items to have a turkey dinner to celebrate and give thanks together. At Christmas, Santa distributes presents to all the children, and Easter includes Easter egg hunts for the children and the breaking of *cascarones* for the adults. These activities strengthen the

parent-child relationship, build the social support network, improve parents' self-esteem, and teach parents how to enjoy life with their children while creating pleasant family memories. These activities also give the parents a sense of belonging and a desire to participate and complete the program. Group activities also include field trips to the public library.

Transportation is provided to and from the center for families residing within assigned geographic tracts, and the preschool children are cared for in an early childhood educational setting. Each parent is asked to volunteer at least 12 times for day care as a required child care practicum. Third-hour activities include speakers from different community organizations that serve as resources and support for the parents. In some family centers, the day is extended by having the parents interact with their children before the parents go to the parenting class.

While participating in the Parent Child Education Program, the parents are visited in their homes once a month for 30 minutes for an observation or videotaping of parent-child play interactions. The tapes are first viewed by the parent in the home and later shown to the class during the parent group. Parents learn from each other and reinforce best "teaching strategies through play." Parents also receive one-to-one support during this time, and social service needs of parents are referred to community agencies with staff follow-up to assure that services were received.

The educational opportunities and economic development program available to graduates of the parenting program is designed to foster self-sufficiency among low-income minority women. AVANCE promotes economic stability and personal growth by providing on-site literacy and educational services. Students are assisted in preparing for college and in college admittance. Parents are encouraged to attend English classes, GED classes, and college classes on-site at the family center. AVANCE works with the local adult education provider to obtain the instructors, while AVANCE offers child care, transportation, and classroom space. As the students acquire the knowledge of how the system works, they gain confidence and enroll on their own, but many continue to need child care provided through AVANCE.

AVANCE Families Building Communities Program: Parents as Leaders and Advocates in the School and Society

Begun with a grant from the Annenberg Foundation, this 3-year program consists of the following three components:

Families Building Community (FBC I): Parenting information for school-age children: This 9-month program consisting of personal development, leadership, and education for parents with children 5 to 17 years is provided for AVANCE parents as a follow-up to the core AVANCE Parent Child Education Program. Some selected topics include "Introduction to How the School and Community Government Works" and "Parents as Decision Makers in School and Civic Engagement."

Parents in School Reform (FBC II): This component provides a project-based learning phase where parents select topics to work on, such as curriculum selection, review of school education and quality standards, and site-based management. FBC II also involves understanding how the system works, including school budgets, teacher selection, school board, and parent or staff roles and responsibilities.

Parent Networking/Advocacy Program (FBC III): This component is organized as the application-based phase, including developing parent councils, a Web site for parents, attending an annual meeting for parents participating in the program, school and community projects, advocacy, and public policy.

Promotora Health Education Program

Begun with a grant from the Hasbro Children's Foundation, this program enhances AVANCE's Core Parenting Education curriculum in the area of health education. The curriculum is formatted in different pamphlets addressing various aspects of health promotion and wellness. Lay parents are also trained to go into the community to educate their neighbors about health promotion and safety. AVANCE is extremely effective in reaching low-income parents and enrolling their children in a health insurance program.

Family Child Care Provider Training Program

This program began with a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. AVANCE developed a curriculum to train parents who desired to become family child care providers. The program consists of a 12-week training course that includes child growth and development, how to begin a business, and specific information about providing high-quality child care in the home. In addition, parents are provided support in financing and getting their home licensed to provide services.

The AVANCE Homebound Child Abuse Program

Begun with a grant from the Texas Department of Human Resources, this support program is for the most at-risk families, those parents who have been referred to AVANCE for child abuse and neglect. Its goals are (1) to provide additional support for families confirmed as child abuse and neglect cases through an individual program in the home and (2) to prevent the reoccurrence of abuse and neglect by developing more effective parenting practices and positive parental role attitudes. Services include weekly visits, individualized parenting education classes in the home, social activities to break isolation, and a comprehensive program for meeting needs through service integration. The parents are mainstreamed to the center-based program when the family situation is stabilized and when the parent is ready for group interactions.

The programs that AVANCE sponsors under its umbrella are those that best respond to the needs of the low-income Hispanic family. Although the needs

are probably similar in any disadvantaged group regardless of race or ethnicity, the methodology is unique to this particular population, taking into consideration dialects and cultural characteristics.

Evaluation Outcomes

There have been several evaluations of the AVANCE programs. Summaries of the research findings are included below.

Project CAN PREVENT

The research findings of Project CAN PREVENT demonstrated that AVANCE was effective in changing the factors and conditions that were contributing to child abuse and neglect, such as increased knowledge of child growth and development, the development of a social support network that had an effect on isolation, and the improvement of self-esteem and hopefulness. Parents attending the AVANCE core program had a change in attitude regarding discipline and how they would handle infractions.

Carnegie Study of Core Parent Child Education Program

In 1987, the agency reached a major milestone in its development with the advent of a Research and Evaluation Study of the AVANCE Parent Child Education Program (1987-91) funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This scientific evaluation has provided strong evidence supporting the effectiveness of the core Parent Child Education Program. AVANCE participants were compared to a control group that did not receive any services. The evaluation found that the program had a substantial effect on the ability of mothers to provide a cognitively stimulating and emotionally nurturing environment for their children. It had strong effects on child-rearing attitudes, knowledge of parenting behavior, and an awareness of community resources. Behavioral observations revealed that AVANCE participants were more responsive to their children, talked more frequently with them, and used play opportunities to teach educational concepts. The mothers understood, accepted, and actively pursued their role as the first teacher of their children. In addition, many more program than control mothers enrolled in classes to obtain a high school equivalency certificate or to acquire college credits. The evaluation concludes that AVANCE parents have the necessary skills to provide an educationally stimulating environment and provide emotional support, they value education for themselves and their children, and they have a knowledge base for effective rearing of children (Johnson & Walker, 1996).

In 1990, an informal 17-year follow-up survey of the first AVANCE class was conducted. Information gathered from the survey revealed that although 91% of the parents had dropped out of school in 1973, 57% had subsequently returned to complete their GED. In addition, 94% of their children had either completed high school, received their GED, or were still in school, and 43% of the children were attending college.

Long-Term Impact on Family Economics—St. Mary’s University

A survey conducted by students at St. Mary’s University included 100 parents who participated and graduated from the AVANCE programs in San Antonio between 1994 and 2001. An important finding was that 60% of families reported an annual income of under \$9,000 before attending AVANCE, and at the time of the interview, 62% reported an annual income of over \$9,000.

Funding

It is not easy keeping a nonprofit grassroots organization in operation. Funds are limited or categorical, and getting ongoing funds is difficult because funders tend to want to support new demonstration projects—and at the most for 3 years. One needs to be entrepreneurial, resourceful, and creative in pooling funds and ensuring that new funds come in before the previous funds run out. In addition, most government funds are provided on a cost-reimbursement basis, and the organization must have at least 3 months’ worth of working capital in order to secure needed funds.

AVANCE began with a 3-year \$100,000-a-year grant from the Zale Foundation to fund the Parenting Program and a Tutoring Program. The Zale Foundation was AVANCE’s sole funder from 1973-75 and continued to support AVANCE with 30% matching funds for 3 additional years. The primary funder from 1975-78 was the Texas State Department of Human Services; by 1979, the City of San Antonio had replaced the Zale Foundation in providing the 30% match. In 1979, the AVANCE programs were funded by a variety of organizations, including the City of San Antonio’s Human Services Department, United Way, and the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. The Project CAN PREVENT grant was the first federal grant prepared and submitted by AVANCE to a federal funding source. It was one of 300 submitted nationally and one of nine selected for funding. Through the grant, the organization gained credibility from a formal needs assessment of the community and the first evaluation of the AVANCE Parent Child Education Program.

Throughout its 30 years, AVANCE has been able to thrive with many different funding partners at a time when many social programs have been affected by massive federal budget cuts. Some funds have been received to support or enhance the core parenting program or to address a community need with services that are connected to the core parenting program. It has not been easy—especially as AVANCE has stayed committed to its original mission. In times of funding crises, it has been the parents and children who have become AVANCE’s greatest advocates.

In 1984, the AVANCE annual budget was \$420,000, with 47% of funds coming from the City of San Antonio Human Services Department, 20% from United Way, 12% from the Texas Department of Human Services (TDHS), 19%

from the federal government, and 2% from the Zale Foundation. The annual budget for the National Office and chapters at the end of June 2002 was \$26,631,898, which consisted of \$20,640,423 from government (86% federal, 8% state, 6% local); \$2,747,677 from foundations; \$110,100 from corporations; \$351,085 from fund-raising; \$1,143,462 from in-kind support; and \$1,639,151 from other sources (United Way, individuals, chapter fees, interest, etc.). In 2000, the Los Angeles County Government awarded AVANCE \$250,000 to incorporate AVANCE in Los Angeles and to serve the first group of parents in that community. The Hilton Foundation provided \$250,000 in California as seed funds for 5 years.

The AVANCE National Office was established with the support of a consortium of the largest foundations, including Carnegie, Ford, Kellogg, Rockefeller, Mott, and Hilton. In 2002, AVANCE received grants from Kellogg and other major foundations to increase its working capital fund, to begin a sustained leadership endowment, and to expand AVANCE to California. AVANCE will be completing a \$4.5 million capital campaign this year for a new headquarters building. Its first annual appeal was held in 2003 as a challenge to a Kresge grant for the capital campaign. In 2001, AVANCE received the Annie E. Casey Families Count Award, which also carries a \$500,000 unrestricted gift.

Program Modifications over the Past 30 Years and Lessons Learned

While still staying centered on its original mission, AVANCE has continued to grow and change over the years to improve on the original program or to accommodate the changing needs of families in the community. For example,

- Changing the supervised baby-sitting program that was provided for parents while they attended their classes to a developmental day care, called the Day Care Lab. Parents are required to volunteer for 12 hours in the Lab to receive a practicum certificate to graduate from the program.
- Condensing the program curriculum from 2 years to 1 year while expanding from 2 hours daily to 3 hours in order to provide as much of the curriculum as possible to a highly transient population located in the housing projects. Adding the third hour gave an unforeseen benefit of providing parents with more information and links to community-based services.
- Adjusting to include more activities when funding for a stipend provided to parents for participating in the program was stopped. AVANCE staff developed a variety of activities for parents to encourage the parents to feel more engaged in the program.
- Adding new topics and new toys to fit the needs and interests of the parents and children.
- Continuing to become more comprehensive, and developmental, providing continuous support to the parents and children.

- Developing resources for fathers when staff realized that they were inadvertently negatively affecting the family by only working with the mothers and the target child under the age of 3.
- Providing more intensive support in the home and in partnership with other social and mental health service providers for at-risk families. For these parents and for the referrals from protective services, AVANCE began a program for parents to prevent child abuse and neglect.
- Developing a Promotora Health Education Program to work with parents in rural areas needing health education services and to encourage enrollment in a health insurance program.
- Adding developmental services to the core program for the children, ensuring that AVANCE children entered early childhood preschool programs or Head Start.
- Collaborating with other early learning programs.
- Creating a curriculum to provide parents with more information about transitioning their child to elementary school and into adolescence as well as becoming advocates in the community.
- Finding ways to address the economic conditions of the parents, including hiring parents from the program and from the community, encouraging parents to continue their high school education and to be aware of various careers, and assisting them with college attendance.
- Creating a Family Child Care Training Program for those parents wanting to work out of their home and provide care for other children.
- Establishing a formal graduation ceremony for children and parents to highlight their accomplishments and build self-confidence.

AVANCE sites have become one of the best employers for the parents and their growing children, especially along the border cities and in poor communities. Staff members strongly believe that AVANCE must be responsive to the needs of the family, and the Circular Intervention Model was developed as a road map for providing services.

Community Development Impact

AVANCE is an active participant and advocate of community development. As a result of leadership emerging from within the community, a group of parents, assisted by AVANCE, obtained a \$100,000 Community Development Block Grant to construct a playground in the Mirasol Housing Project. Parents educated their state representatives about the importance of supporting and sustaining AVANCE in their community and helped secure a \$1.7 million grant from the Texas Education Agency. Also, parents become more active and involved in the schools and in their community as leaders in the PTA and Resident Association, and in initiating community projects such as building a playground for their children or starting a community crime watch program.

Other programs are added to the existing organization to be responsive to the needs of the community. AVANCE changed from a focus of getting the child ready for school to a more comprehensive and continuous support of the

entire family to simultaneously strengthening the family and the community. Slogans that were used were “the strength of the community lies in the strength of the family” and “from the cradle to the job.” Dr. Rodriguez and AVANCE staff came to the realization that social and economic problems are interrelated; for example, if one finds a dropout problem, one may also find child abuse, crime, poverty, spouse abuse, etc. The root cause of most of these problems lies in a dysfunctional family in great need of assistance and support. Parents rekindle their spirit of hope when they receive culturally relevant and effective services.

AVANCE felt that there needed to be a developmental sequential service approach for both parents and children. The child needed to continue to grow developmentally; the parents needed continued support in their role as parents (especially during the critical period of preadolescence and adolescence); and the whole family needed to grow educationally, personally, and economically.

Expansion of Facilities, Locations, and Clients

Initially, AVANCE was housed in two 3-bedroom apartments in the Mirasol Housing Project. Then it replicated to three San Antonio communities in six 3-bedroom apartments in the Mirasol Housing Project, in a house located adjacent to a low-income housing complex, and in a large wing in a city-owned building called the West End Multi-Service Center. Today, AVANCE chapters and affiliates can be found in schools, housing projects, churches, storefronts, houses, and in their leased/own buildings. In Houston, AVANCE has six sites. Individuals served have increased from 58 in 1973 to 15,000 in 2002; staff increased from 4 in 1973 to over 600 by 2002.

Name Change

The organization’s name changed from AVANCE Neighborhood Intervention Program to AVANCE, Inc., in 1990. AVANCE, Inc., is now AVANCE’s legal name. Today, it is more commonly known as AVANCE Family Support and Education Programs, which include the Parent Child Education Program (the core program) and all AVANCE programs.

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Responses to the Presentation by Gloria Rodriguez

After presenting her paper, Gloria Rodriguez answered questions from symposium participants. A panel then convened to respond to her presentation.

Questions and Comments from Participants Responding to Gloria Rodriguez's Presentation

Participant: Could you explain a little more about the chapter system of AVANCE?

Gloria Rodriguez: We have a national headquarters and then individual chapters in other locations. Each chapter has a local board of directors, but each chapter must meet the standards—a checklist including finance and other programmatic standards—of AVANCE. They are allowed some flexibility to adjust the program to their community, but within our guidelines and standards.

Participant: I understand that AVANCE uses a structured curriculum. Could you explain a little more about your curriculum and why you have chosen a structured approach?

Gloria Rodriguez: Yes, we do use a structured approach that we have worked to build over many years and, after reviewing research, with our parents. We don't ask parents to come and then say, "Learn what you want," because many of the families come to us not knowing where they should start. Our approach includes working in the parent group on predesigned activities, in the classroom settings, and also in the home.

People come to the program knowing what we expect—there are desks, they raise their hands to ask questions, they can't smoke or bring firearms. Once the parent goes through the program, then he or she is ready to move on to another level, such as community college. That is partly because although the program is structured, it is also nurturing. We believe that with the right support, you can make progress.

Panel Session—Responding to the AVANCE Experience and the Question “What Should Be Done to Help Hard-to-Reach Parents Get Ready for School?”

Moderator: Jean Paine Mendoza, University of Illinois

Low audio quality prevented full transcription of the panel session. The themes that were addressed during the discussion are summarized below.

1. *The need to acknowledge that perhaps the right question is “How do we get schools ready for hard-to-reach parents?”*

Understanding how schools should prepare for parents and students seems to be the more respectful way of looking at this issue. Then we can ask, “How do we change infrastructures and bureaucracies that are not conducive to providing parent support?”

One way is to bring people—parents and teachers—together to build formal and informal relationships in a variety of settings. Parents often interpret school-related terminology as a personal attack on them. If school personnel begin early by forming groups of parents and school staff who have regular conversations about a variety of topics, then parents won’t view school personnel as potentially threatening and will be more receptive to, for example, early literacy-related concepts.

School personnel should also be creative in developing ways to engage parents and eventually develop a “parent-driven” model. For example, in one school, a regular Saturday morning play day and cookout was most effective with involving fathers.

2. *The need to clarify effective methods of communication.*

It is important to understand the actual goals of the communication and then take the information to where it is accessible to the parents such as the church, the grocery store, clinics and hospitals, or other places that parents frequent. In communities where neighbor-to-neighbor conversation is a primary source of information, it is helpful to develop verbal ways of sharing information. Programs could provide a multidimensional platform where folks have a variety of ways and opportunities to share information and work together. Television is a medium that reaches most parents, and even though it is expensive, it should not be ruled out as a possibility.

3. *The need to identify what are sustainable models for programs and how to create them.*

Sometimes program guidelines get in the way of really serving families and maintaining the program. Programs should have a set of principles, a leadership base, and structure (for example, a business model) that will ensure its

continuity in the community for as long as the program is needed. Establishing trust and long-term relationships with the families in the community is critical. One of the reasons that the Reggio model is so successful is because children and families are approached respectfully with an understanding that there will be long-term relationships.

If the program guidelines are flexible enough to adjust to the changing needs of parents and families, participation is more likely to be sustainable. Although it is obvious that we want to look at programs that are working, it is also important to look critically at the ones that are not working, even if it sets a negative frame. Understanding the barriers to a program's successful implementation will help improve outcomes over the long run.

4. The need to define what is meant by “vulnerable” without being disrespectful of families but still acknowledging that there are inequalities.

All too frequently, politicians and educators are making decisions about who is “vulnerable” or “at risk.” Parents should be included in the conversation about what is meant by vulnerable children and families. Including parents in the conversation will help reduce the possibility of seeing vulnerable parents as “those” parents, or of seeing the problems or issues of vulnerable families as so separate from the problems of others. Individuals who are given the responsibility as educators to prepare parents may not know the intricacies and protocol that are important within the culture that they are serving. Sometimes there are dual goals in terms of the skills that the parents and their community expect for their children and what the educator may expect. When educators understand the goals of the parents and larger community, it may then be possible to integrate expectations, thereby reducing vulnerability.