

Educate Tomorrow's Parents (ETP) 2005

I became haunted by all the children aching for love and praying for their parents to change. Randi Rubenstein, Founder

Educate Tomorrow's Parents is another project started through personal experience. Randi Rubenstein worked in health research and education for 30 years and has an MA in Public Health. But it was her experience of fostering ten children that motivated her to start this program. Fostering was challenging, but the compulsory parenting classes were surprisingly useful. 'My discovery of this valuable information illuminated a serious gap in the way we prepare people for parenting. Doesn't everyone who becomes a parent need to know how to provide for and protect a child? Why aren't we taught before we have children?' A good question: one-fifth of US children have experienced two or more ACEs.

So she created the *Healthy Foundations for Future Families* program (2005), piloting it in schools and finding that teachers, students and parents were receptive. This led to the birth of Education for Successful Parenting, later changing its name to Educate Tomorrow's Parents (ETP), begun in Orange County, California now thriving from its headquarters in Raleigh, North Carolina. As a non-profit organisation with a board of directors, it could attract grants and donations, making it affordable for the schools and students who were seen to need it most. (In the US they call the equivalent of charities 'non-profits' which are still considered a business or corporation. The 'ownership' is different; a non-profit is owned by the public for public-benefit, not for private-gain. In most other respects, it functions as a business.)

ETP's mission is prevention: to improve children's wellbeing by preparing teenagers for parenting before they conceive the next generation. It offers an innovative curriculum and group instruction for young adults, educators, parents and professionals

and ‘envision[s] a world in which all children can reach their full potential, and adverse childhood experiences are eliminated.’

It is vital that students grasp the basic concept of parenting as a decades-long endeavor, with life-long impacts. Randi

Its core curriculum, *Healthy Foundations for Future Families*, educates 13-to-21-year-olds about the responsibilities of parenting. It is mainly implemented in public high school health education classes, a US course that’s generally mandatory. It’s been used with young people up to 21 who are fostered; social workers have bought the materials to use with parents. It meets national Essential Standards for Health Education and Family and Consumer Science courses. ETP now works in 38 US states.

Instead of preaching what not to do, ETP invites teens to apply their newfound knowledge to shape and fulfil their life goals. Randi

This curriculum is research-based, factual and drawn from multiple disciplines. Students learn the many factors affecting children’s health and wellbeing with the aim of improved knowledge, attitudes and behavior of teenagers so they can make informed and healthy choices before having children and be better able to care for them. All cultural and religious values and socio-economic backgrounds are respected. ETP is accessible for students of all levels, including those with learning difficulties. It draws inspiration from studies on the prevention of the maltreatment of children. ETP wants to help reduce stress factors (poverty, poor health, lack of social support) by guiding teenagers to set goals, make good choices, resolve ambivalence, and become conscious of how they might move to or away from their goals.

ETP teaches about children’s needs and development. It makes them aware how to cope by looking at problem-solving skills which they might not have learnt from their own families. It

focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses: how to create a personal, positive vision of their goals for parenthood. It aims to be fully inclusive, engaging both males and females. Students with limited literacy can answer the workbook questions by speaking or drawing, or have the questions read to them if they are too embarrassed to ask for help. Advanced students can be given supplements to the workbook, involving research/ presentations.

Healthy, achievable parenting goals are based on what parents will do for and with their children, not on what children will do or be for the parent.

During the interactive program, each student completes the centerpiece of ETP: a personalized *My Life-Plan for Parenting* (a 28-page workbook) as they learn about children's needs. PowerPoint slides provide current scientific facts and statistics, props, discussion, videos, role-plays and activities. For instructors and parents, ETP offers the *My Life-Plan for Parenting: Discussion Guide* (200-pages) with lesson plans, examples of teenagers' completed workbook pages, references and a description of ETP's methodology and what they call 'the logic model' – a visual diagram of how ETP leads to good outcomes, prepared parents and healthier children. The new *Instructor's Kit* includes slides, props, videos and much else. They offer onsite training for schools and organisations, and a program for parents and carers of teenagers, *Generation to Generation*, (full details on the website.)

The contents page of *My Life-Plan for Parenting* workbook makes useful reading:

The dream of a family

Importance

Priorities; parenting in my life plan; my childhood;

Purpose

Reasons for having a child; feelings about not raising one;

Goals: for me as a parent; for my child; for my family; creating my personal plan;

Forming a Family

Relationships: who do you love? family relationships and children; planning for the unplanned;

Timing and health: planning and preparing ahead;

Meeting a Child's Needs

Provide: my financial plan; time and money considerations;

Protect;

Nurture;

Managing a Family

Child management: what's in my parenting toolkit? applying my skills

Life management: resources; applying my skills;

My parenting pledge: Students have written: *I promise to take care of you and never let you cry yourself to sleep like me / I will be the best father ever, just wait!*

As an example from the workbook, this exercise prompts teenagers to reflect and plan:

My childhood: what I know about parenting so far (list three things for each of these):

- a) Things I experienced that I want to do the *same* for my child
- b) Things I experienced that I want to do *differently* for my child.

Child development material is translated into 'plain speak': students are inspired and motivated to try new skills with true stories and case studies. Both males and females are engaged, reinforcing the role of fathers. When ETP has the chance to deliver a longer course, maybe over one semester (half-a-year), it has time also to make use of poems, lyrics, and cartoons.

*Classroom management is a breeze because the lessons
are fun, interactive and meaningful. Randi*

To make it flexible, and to accommodate those with limited time and specific needs, the curriculum is designed in modules with distinct topics. ‘Specific needs’ include those of fostered youth, teenage parents or children of migrant farmers. Components can be used separately or together. For instance, some groups use only the workbook. The program can last between three and thirty hours. Topics include goals, healthy relationships, perils of teenage parenting, preconception/pre-natal health including the risks of pre-natal alcohol and drugs, fatherhood, absent fathers, prevention of child abuse and neglect, and positive parenting techniques. Instructors choose the topics and components according to the needs and interests of the students.

The program encourages self-sufficiency, strong family structure, social health, physical and mental health, awareness of parenting and child development. It covers parents’ responsibility for pre-conception and ante-natal health, anticipating and meeting children’s post-natal needs along the lines of Maslow’s hierarchy: the need for physical health, safety, belonging, self-esteem. Teenagers become aware of the needs for social network support to strengthen their future families and of the harm to the fetus from smoking and alcohol. It includes all factors representing adverse childhood experiences with their life-long consequences.

ETP is trauma-informed, teaching how maltreatment of infants has long-term consequences. Instructors are expected to interact with students in sensitive ways, recognising that the material can trigger painful memories. ‘When a student appears to be “misbehaving,” we don’t first treat it like a discipline problem. We find out what the student is experiencing, what they might need. Most of the time we find a student has become animated because he can relate to a topic and just wants to discuss it with a classmate. In that case we let them continue their conversation. If things get too disruptive, we explore solutions that can help them de-stress, allowing them to move about the room or leave the room if

needed. We always approach them with compassion. It's important to make students feel safe during these lessons. The program is non-judgmental and compassionate about the challenges of parenting. Most students love their parents deeply. Seeming to criticise parents' behaviour, such as beating or withholding food, could heighten their anxiety.' Instead, using scientific research, they focus on characteristics of strong families, healthy behaviour and relationships, and positive parenting.'

Randi writes: 'If we had treated disruptive behaviours as discipline issues rather than being trauma-sensitive, we would have missed the opportunity to hear the students' stories. And these students would have missed the opportunity to have their experiences validated and honored. Ironically, they would have been side-lined and dismissed, even though these teens need our information about healthy families perhaps more than anyone else in class.'

Randi gives a vivid example, showing the need to treat students' behaviour with curiosity and understanding rather than disciplinary attitudes. 'In one class, a young man was repeatedly talking loudly with his friends next to him. After several requests for him to speak more softly, we respectfully asked if we could move him to another location in the class. He agreed. After class, we talked with him and found he was very excited because he could relate to everything being discussed. His mother was his age (14) when she became pregnant. Because she couldn't care for him, he was raised by his grandparents. He was happy we were talking with his class about situations like his to help other teens make better decisions. He has ADHD, which made it difficult for him to control his behavior when he became excited. I was so glad we had never treated him as if he was misbehaving.'

*Many fragile families have been created impulsively
and without sufficient discussion between partners. Randi*

ETP offers four levels of service, whether you work directly with teenagers, want ETP to conduct a program, want your instructors trained how to deliver the program, or want them certified by ETP. ETP teaches 15,000 teenagers a year, in public schools, private and alternative ones, after-school programs, universities, residential probation programs, fostered youth schemes and young offenders' programs. It would passionately like to train more trainers in any country. Teaching materials are available for purchase on its website: www.eduparents.org which also warmly invites volunteers for various roles including assistant instructors. You can contact ETP if you want to learn how to run the course yourselves and can request a proposal tailored to your organisation's needs, book a guest speaker or get a free sample lesson plan by emailing info@eduparents.org. And in response to the Covid pandemic and schools shifting to online learning, ETP created online lessons with slides and fillable workbook pages, available for purchase through the *TeachersPayTeachers* website. On the website, you can access a free paper for teachers, *7 Tips for Instructing about Reproduction and Family Health*, and watch a video featuring ETP and Randi's adopted daughter Lurae.

The US has the highest rates in developed countries of teen parents, children living in poverty, fatherless families, and foster children. ETP website

Roots of Empathy and Teens and Toddlers, originated in Canada/US, operate in the UK. See their work in Part Two.

Postscript: Why the demise?

The most disappointing part of writing this book was learning of the shrinking or demise of most UK and US programs like Dads Make A Difference (DMAD.) For example, California was a rare part of the world with mandatory parenting education. The department of education provided materials and training for three curricula within its home economics, careers and technology department in Sacramento, including parenthood, to meet the state's statutory parenting education requirements. Their guide was