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CHOICE:

COURT HELP ON INCREASING CONTROL AND EFFECTIVENESS

THE OAKLAND COUNTY PROBATE COURT'S PARENT TRAINING PROGRAM

AWARD RECIPIENT

given by

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges

for

"OUTSTANDING EDUCATION PROGRAM"

The Honorable Eugene Arthur Moore
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cmc

CHOICE

The CHOICE Program

CHOICE is the Oakland County Probate Court's Parent Training program for parents of delinquents. CHOICE means Court Help on Increasing Control and Effectiveness. The acronym was chosen carefully to reflect two things: 1.) The word choice and the acronym more accurately describes what occurs in this parent guidance program; that is, the program is designed to assist mothers and fathers to increase their control and effectiveness as parents, and parents have choices in the program; 2.) The acronym is a way of making the program more user-friendly to the parents who are court-ordered to attend.

The CHOICE program is a parent training and education program for parents of delinquents placed in the Oakland County Probate Court's Intensive Probation program. Young people and their parents, in this intensive probation program, receive more intensive services to assist teens in avoiding more delinquency and subsequently more extensive court or community services. One of the services provided in Intensive Probation is parent training classes.

The parent training feature of Intensive Probation began in January, 1991, and the name CHOICE was selected in 1992. The goal of the CHOICE program is to train parents to use more appropriate discipline and child management skills. In developing the program, it was understood that parents of delinquents often are deficient in their ability to parent effectively. That usually means that they respond in a capricious and erratic manner to their children's behavior, fail to use consistent discipline techniques, and frequently employ severe or harsh discipline which produces resentment, hostility, anger, and more disobedience.

Parents of delinquents often feel out of control and believe their youngster to be unmanageable. As parents, they lack understanding of appropriate discipline skills, have not learned alternative child-rearing techniques, and lack self-confidence in their parenting abilities.

It has also been found that parents court ordered into a parent training program are defensive, frequently deny their need for parenting help, and tend to blame their children for acting out problems. In order for a parent training program to be successful with this population of parents, the program must be friendly, informative, and stimulating. The CHOICE program is all of those things in meeting the needs of parents of delinquents.

Reaching Parents Who Need Parenting Help

There has never been a question that parents of delinquents need assistance with parenting duties. Often such parents will admit in evaluations and interviews that they have exhausted their resources, have tried all they know how to use as disciplinarians, and have a very limited repertoire of parenting skills. At the same time, they are defensive if it is suggested that they may have inadequacies as parents.

In fact, often such parents have only one delinquent child. Other children in the family frequently present no significant acting out problems and are reared with more or less success by these same parents. This observation, when pointed out to parents, helps them understand that we do not regard them as inadequate or hopeless. The CHOICE position is presented as one of help and understanding with sympathy for the difficulties they have had in raising a difficult child.

Every effort is made to present CHOICE as a friendly place for parents. Caseworkers and probation officers are encouraged to be friendly and positive in talking about the CHOICE program to parents. That is, instead of the program being ordered as a punishment to parents, it is an opportunity to meet with other parents and talk about problems of raising children. An appeal is made to the parent's usual sense of isolation by indicating the group support aspect of CHOICE.

Likewise, the initial letter sent to parents letting them know of the next scheduled meeting is a somewhat less officious and, it is hoped, more friendly letter. The positive aspects of the program are highlighted (the opportunity to learn about discipline, support will be received from other parents, and a free booklet of helpful material about discipline will be given out) and included with the letter is a flier explaining CHOICE and featuring quotes from other parents who have taken the class.

The quotes in this flier give parents an indication of what previous class members think about the program:

"There was an open, easy atmosphere that encouraged all of us to share our experiences and concerns."

"Nine months of counseling didn't accomplish what eight weeks of this class did."

"The part that was most helpful to me was listening to the concerns of other parents and knowing someone cared."

"I hated seeing it come to an end."

These positive and sincere responses from parents epitomize what CHOICE tries to accomplish: Assisting parents to find a place where they can feel comfortable enough to talk about their concerns about raising their kids and feel good enough about a program to get help

from the material presented.

At the first session, it is established that the leader and the parents are partners and friends -- not blaming adversaries.

Refreshments are served, nametags are worn, and parents introduce themselves and talk about their families. The class leader, a psychologist with years of experience in working with parents and children, greets parents as they arrive and makes attempts to have parents begin to feel part of the group. In beginning to talk about the program, the leader shares his own experiences as a parent telling stories about the raising of his own children. This lets parents know that he is not a perfect parent with perfect kids, but a parent who sometimes made mistakes just like they do.

At the end of the first session, parents are given a notebook of parenting materials and a homework assignment. There is an implicit commitment that they will complete their homework assignment and return the next week to talk more about mutual parenting experiences.

The Content of the CHOICE Program

Friendliness, a comfortable support group, an experienced leader, and refreshments are helpful, but parents do not stay in a parent training program for these reasons alone. The only thing that can induce parents of delinquents to return each week for eight weeks is a recognition that they are getting something out of the classes. The content of CHOICE must teach them important parenting skills in a way that helps them to feel like there is something in it for them.

How does CHOICE do this?

It's done by establishing an atmosphere conducive to learning. It is a warm, friendly atmosphere featuring humor and cheerfulness from the leader. But beneath the warmth and the positiveness is a fundamentally sound program that makes a real connection to the family life of parents of delinquents.

Parents of delinquents are often angry, hurting parents. They have been strained to the limits by their children and by a court system that sometimes seems impersonal and insensitive to them. The CHOICE program, recognizing these feelings, tries to touch parents where they are hurting. Part of the strain and the hurt is their feeling they are being blamed and punished for raising a delinquent. They need both sympathy and understanding. They also need a ready explanation that does not crush their fragile egos and which helps them explain why they have a child in trouble with the law. In the very first session, the leader addresses this issue.

"What causes kids to act out so seriously that they are adjudicated as delinquents?" the leader will ask in the opening meeting. He then answers this question. But it is done in a unique way that preserves the sense of dignity that these parents need. The question is answered through discussion of temperamentally

difficult children.

"You didn't make him difficult," they are told. "He was born with a temperament that made him a difficult child to parent."

For these parents to hear a professional say what they have privately thought or believed brings a tremendous relief to the parents in a CHOICE class. This reduces tension and is the beginning of a new understanding for them. But from this simple beginning, the leader, with a newly-won sense of credibility, can explain the process of how and why children become delinquent and the role parents play in the process.

Building on this initial session, the leader can introduce key points important to the parenting process, and gradually teach the steps parents can take to reverse the child's delinquent behavior patterns. The important parenting principles, taught over the eight weeks of the course, are as follows:

1. Week One: Why children have problem behavior
2. Week Two: The role of parental criticism and how to begin to make changes by using Praise and Attention
3. Week Three: Ways to bring about appropriate behavior by giving Rewards and Privileges
4. Week Four: Reminder Praise as a way of reinforcing positive behavior in children & how to reason with your teenager
5. Week Five: Communicating Expectations and learning to ignore misbehavior
6. Week Six: What is effective punishment and how to reprimand an adolescent
7. Week Seven: Using punishments like Time-out and Removing Rewards and Privileges
8. Week Eight: Putting it all together -- A review of all the techniques learned

As parents are learning to apply discipline, including punishment, in appropriate ways, they are given homework assignments at the end of every class. These assignments are to be completed and returned each week. These completed assignments are the basis for discussion at the beginning of each class period.

Many parents enter a CHOICE program believing that they have "tried everything and nothing works with my kid." This is understood, and it is important to help the parents not only learn new techniques, but to retry old ones with new guidelines. These guidelines are given each week as a new discipline skill is learned. The printed handout giving the guidelines are distributed and parents add them to their notebooks. The notebooks become the manual they wish they had when their child was younger.

The CHOICE class just described is the basic program. Because

this whole program is called CHOICE, there are in fact choices for parents. In 1992, CHOICE began a second type of class for parents. This one is a 12-week series for parents who have a delinquent who is diagnosed as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. This 12-week series gives detailed information to parents about attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity, and the discipline techniques that work best with such children and teens.

Other choices abound for parents. They have the option of daytime or evening classes, and they can choose more than one location in the county. In addition, during 1993, the CHOICE program will launch a new parenting series for parents of adolescent sexual offenders.

The Results of CHOICE

How successful is the program?

CHOICE was developed to offer special training and skills to parents. How well we do this job is a subject of on-going evaluation and research. After two years of the CHOICE program and more than 40 parent training series, there are three ways of looking at the results:

1. How good is CHOICE at keeping parents in the program?

If parents don't attend a majority of the sessions, it doesn't matter how good the leader or the material presented in the class. Parents must attend and attend with regularity. Do they?

Of the 142 parents who attended at least one session in 1992, more than 100 (or about 70 percent) attended at least half of the sessions. Fifty-five attended a majority of the eight sessions and 15 percent had perfect attendance. Parents with a minimum attendance of six sessions earned a certificate. The number of parents earning certificates in 1992 more than doubled over 1991. This tells us that a better job is being done to hold parents in the classes after they have shown up to test it out.

2. Do the parents like CHOICE?

Of the 142 parents who gave the program a try and stuck with it over the eight sessions (even if they didn't have perfect attendance), 98 percent said in surveys after the class was over that they thought it was an outstanding program. Ninety percent indicated that their child's behavior had improved over the eight weeks the class was held.

The complaints about the program? Yes, there were complaints. But they were often the kind of complaints that CHOICE appreciates. Parents told us they preferred different times or different locations; they said that they wished the class was longer than eight weeks; many parents sincerely wish they had had an opportunity to attend such a class when their difficult child was younger. In short, a majority of parents volunteered that they were

sorry to see the class end, and some volunteered to continue attending by coming to other CHOICE classes. In general, the one thing that parents seem to universally enjoy about CHOICE is that they have a chance to talk to other parents with similar problems.

3. What does the research suggest?

The Family Environment Scale has been used as a pre and post-test for two years. The results of this test show that in the space of eight weeks these parents of delinquent adolescents become more involved in social and recreational activities with their families and felt a greater sense of control over their children. This suggests that there is a greater reliance on set rules and procedures to run the family.

Also, the Family Environment Scale, which measures changes in the family environment and the parental perception of changes, shows some important decreases. Most significantly, there is, on the test, demonstrably less conflict with less openly expressed anger and aggression in our families.

What all of the three ways of evaluating CHOICE show is that parents who attend a class feel extremely positive about the program and their experience in it. More importantly, they believe they have learned something about parenting which translates into their viewing their child's behavior as improved, themselves having more control over their children, and with less anger and hostility in the family.

We can never say what we think about the program as well as our parents. This parent perhaps sums it up best:

"If I had been in this class ten years ago, I wouldn't be in the class now."

ATTACHMENTS

LIST OF ATTACHMENTS --

1. INITIAL LETTER TO PARENTS
2. FLIER FOR PARENTS
3. SAMPLE NOTEBOOK OF PARENTING MATERIALS
4. SATISFACTION QUESTIONNAIRE
5. CERTIFICATE

State of Michigan



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313-858-0066
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February 8, 1993

Dear

You have been selected to participate in the CHOICE Program for parents with children in the Juvenile Court system. This program begins on Friday, February 12, 1993 at 10:30 a.m.

The parents in this CHOICE Program will meet once a week for eight weeks (February 12 - April 2, 1993) from 10:30 a.m. to 12:00 Noon in the Probate Court Large Conference Room on the Second Floor of the East Wing of the Oakland County Courthouse.

This is one of several classes offered by the CHOICE Program. CHOICE is the Probate Court's parent program and CHOICE means Court Help On Increasing Control and Effectiveness. All of our parenting programs are designed with that goal in mind; to assist you to have better control and effectiveness with your youngster.

In this program you will have a chance to meet and talk with other parents who are experiencing similar problems and you will learn about behavior problems. In the class, techniques will be discussed that assist parents to better manage difficult youngsters. At the first session you will be introduced to the program and receive a free notebook that will give you valuable information about parenting. Each week you will learn more and get valuable handouts to add to your notebook.

I look forward to seeing you on Friday, February 12, 1993 at 10:30 a.m. Because I expect a full class, it will be necessary for you to call or return the enclosed card prior to the first meeting in order to reserve a spot for you in this class.

If you have any questions, please call (313) 858-0086.

James Windell
James Windell, M.A.

rmh

cc: Court File
Clinic File
Caseworker

WHAT IS CHOICE?

CHOICE IS THE FIRST CHOICE FOR PARENTS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW TO BE EFFECTIVE AND LOVING PARENTS. CHOICE MEANS COURT HELP ON INCREASING CONTROL AND EFFECTIVENESS. CHOICE IS THE PARENTING PROGRAM FOR THE OAKLAND COUNTY PROBATE COURT.

WHAT IS THE CHOICE PROGRAM ALL ABOUT?

THE CHOICE PROGRAM PRESENTS CLASSES FOR PARENTS IN THE PROBATE COURT. THESE CLASSES ARE DESIGNED TO ASSIST PARENTS TO GAIN FURTHER EFFECTIVENESS AS PARENTS, TO HELP IN IMPROVING DISCIPLINE AND CONTROL, AND TO BRING TOGETHER MOTHERS AND FATHERS TO PROVIDE MUTUAL SUPPORT AND UNDERSTANDING.

WHAT ARE THE CHOICES I HAVE?

YOU MAY NOT HAVE A CHOICE TO ATTEND OR NOT ATTEND A CHOICE CLASS AS YOU MAY HAVE BEEN COURT-ORDERED TO ATTEND. HOWEVER, YOU DO HAVE SOME SIGNIFICANT CHOICE.

YOU CAN ATTEND A CLASS IN ROYAL OAK OR PONTIAC. YOU CAN ATTEND AN EVENING CLASS OR A DAYTIME CLASS. YOU MAY ALSO ELECT TO ATTEND THE BASIC CHOICE PROGRAM OR A SPECIAL CLASS FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER. SOON, A THIRD CHOICE WILL BE OFFERED IN THAT THERE WILL BE A CLASS FOR PARENTS OF ADOLESCENT SEXUAL OFFENDERS. IN THE FUTURE THERE WILL ALSO BE A SUPPORT GROUP FOR PARENTS.

WHAT DO THE CLASSES TEACH? (OR WHAT WILL I LEARN FROM THE CHOICE CLASSES?)

THE BASIC CHOICE CLASS IS AN EIGHT-WEEK SERIES WHICH TEACHES ABOUT THE ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PARENTING AND DESCRIBES A NUMBER OF IMPORTANT DISCIPLINE SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES. PARENTS ARE TAUGHT HOW TO HANDLE DISCIPLINE AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS WHILE INCREASING THEIR YOUNGSTER'S SELF-ESTEEM. BY LEARNING A NUMBER OF DISCIPLINE TECHNIQUES, PARENTS SEE THAT THEY HAVE CHOICES WHEN IT COMES TO USING EFFECTIVE AND APPROPRIATE DISCIPLINE.

THE CLASS FOR PARENTS OF ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS IS A TWELVE-WEEK SERIES THAT WILL TEACH PARENTS THAT THEY NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE PROBLEMS OF INATTENTION, DISTRACTIBILITY, HYPERACTIVITY, AND IMPULSIVENESS. IT WILL FOCUS ON GIVING PARENTS VALUABLE INFORMATION WHILE ALSO HELPING PARENTS DEAL WITH THE MANAGEMENT AND BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS OF AN ADHD YOUNGSTER.

THE CLASS FOR PARENTS OF ADOLESCENT SEXUAL OFFENDERS IS DESIGNED TO PROVIDE IMPORTANT INFORMATION TO MOTHERS AND FATHERS ABOUT ADOLESCENCE, SEXUALITY, AND HOW TO MOST PROPERLY DEAL WITH A CHILD WHO HAS ACTED OUT WITH SEXUAL BEHAVIOR. PARENTS WILL BE PROVIDED WITH INFORMATION TO BETTER UNDERSTAND WHY THEIR CHILD GOT INTO THIS TYPE OF DIFFICULTY WHILE BEING SUPPORTIVE TO PARENTS.

PARENT GUIDANCE SATISFACTION QUESTIONNAIRE

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

The following questionnaire is part of our evaluation of the Parent Guidance program. It is important that you answer as honestly as possible. Your answers will be valuable to us in evaluating and continually improving the Parent Guidance program.

A. THE OVERALL PARENT GUIDANCE PROGRAM

Please circle the answer that best describes how you honestly feel.

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1. | My child's problems at this point are |
| | Worse The Same Improved |
- | | |
|----|---|
| 2. | When I started the Parent Guidance program, I expected |
| | No Help Some Help A Lot of Help |
- | | |
|----|--|
| 3. | I feel this program helped me |
| | Very Little Some What A Great Deal |
- | | |
|----|--|
| 4. | Would you recommend the Parent Guidance Program to a friend or relative? |
| | Strongly Not
Recommend Recommend |
- | | |
|----|--|
| 5. | How confident are you in managing your child's behavior problems at this time? |
| | Confident Average Very Unconfident |
- | | |
|----|---|
| 6. | My overall feeling about the Parent Guidance program is |
| | Negative Average Positive |

B. TEACHING FORMAT

In this section, we'd like to get your ideas about the way the class was taught. Please circle the answer that best describes your opinion.

- | | | | |
|--|------|---------|-----------|
| 1. Lecture information was | Easy | Average | Difficult |
| 2. The explanation of the discipline skills by the leader were | Easy | Average | Hard |
| 3. Practicing discipline skills that were discussed in the group was | Easy | Average | Hard |

4. The homework assignments were
Easy Average Hard
5. The written handouts were
Easy to Average Hard to
Understand Understand
6. The way the class was taught and the presentation
of the material was
Interesting Average Very Uninteresting
7. The discipline techniques taught in this class were
Not Useful Average Very Useful

C. THE LEADER

In this section, we'd like to get your ideas about the leader of the Parent Guidance sessions. Please circle the answer that best describes your opinion about the leader.

1. Was the leader prepared for each session?
Not Prepared Average Very Prepared
2. Regarding the leader's interest and concern about me
and my child, I was
Dissatisfied Average Satisfied
3. At this point, I feel the leader was
Not Helpful Average Very Helpful
4. Did the leader help you feel comfortable about discussing
problems and concerns?
Felt Uncomfortable Average Felt Comfortable

D. YOUR OPINIONS PLEASE

In this section, we would like you to write your opinions about the Parent guidance program. Use as much space as you would like.

1. What part of the Parent Guidance Program was most helpful
to you?

2. What did you like most about the classes?

3. What did you like least about the classes?

4. What part of the program would you like to see changed?

5. How do you think parents could be helped to get more from the Parent Guidance program?