

Getting Fathers to Parenting Groups (without really trying)

- how Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.) brings them in!

Introduction

- The author has been teaching Parent Effectiveness Training in Canberra for the past 13 years. Over that time she has noted a relatively high attendance rate (35%) of men (fathers, step-fathers and foster parents)
- Lundahl et al, 2008 suggest that the attendance rate of fathers at parent education courses is around 20%. They imply that titles such as Parent Effectiveness Training indicate inadequacies in the parent, thus discouraging father participation.
- The aim of this study was to examine possible reasons for the high attendance rate of men at P.E.T. courses in Canberra, and to look at some outcomes for participants.

A preliminary sample of the results is presented in this poster.

Background – P.E.T.

- Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.) was developed in 1962 by American psychologist, Dr Thomas Gordon. The course has been taught in Australia since the early 1970s.
- P.E.T. takes a Rogerian, relationship-based, democratic approach to parenting. The course teaches relationship skills in the form of respectful communication, emphasising mutual respect.
- P.E.T. differentiates itself from other parenting courses because it does not use rewards and punishment (such as time-out or star charts) to change child behaviour. Instead, there is an emphasis on win-win conflict resolution. P.E.T. aims to see a change in child behaviour because of **consideration** of others, rather than **compliance** with parental power.
- The course systematically takes participants through the skills needed to resolve conflict. Beginning with Dr Gordon's unique 'who owns the problem' model, parents are practically introduced to the skills of active listening, I-messages, dealing with resistance (shifting gears), no-lose conflict resolution and values conflicts.
- Two important aims of P.E.T. are to:
 - help parents understand and empathise with their children, resulting in a change in attribution of intent; and
 - help develop emotional intelligence and resilience in both parent and child
- P.E.T. is highly practical and experiential, and is generally run over eight weeks, with one 3 hour session per week.

Method.

A 10 question survey was designed on the internet survey tool "SurveyMonkey". An explanatory email, which included a link to the survey, was sent to 69 men who had participated in P.E.T. courses from 2008 to 2010. Eight of the emails bounced back, so it is assumed that 61 men received the request. A reminder email was sent two weeks before the closing date of the survey. The survey was anonymous, and responses could not be linked with participants.

Results

Thirty two (32) of the 61 men surveyed returned their survey form. This is a response rate of **53%**. Not all questions were answered by all participants.

Some of the survey questions, and a sample of the main response themes, are listed in this poster.

Time elapsed since attending a P.E.T. course
90% of the respondents had attended the course more than six months previously, with 29% having attended in 2008 or before.

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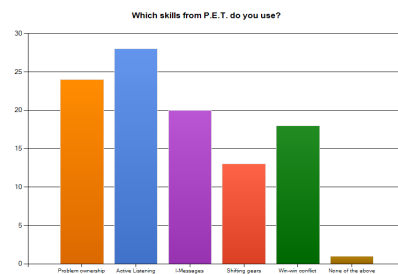
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"I have completed other 'parenting' courses but they concentrate on discipline and gaining compliance of the children. A generalisation, but I believe discipline is not something men tend to have trouble implementing so the 'tools' taught on other courses are not relevant to most men (ie - fathers). On the other hand, PET improves families by improving relationships, this is an area (another generalisation) that men DO need help with in their lives." (quote from a father who completed the P.E.T and Men survey, 2010)

Family Type

72% of the men were partnered (with children of the partnership). 19% had shared care of their children, and 9% lived in a blended family. One respondent was a non-resident father.

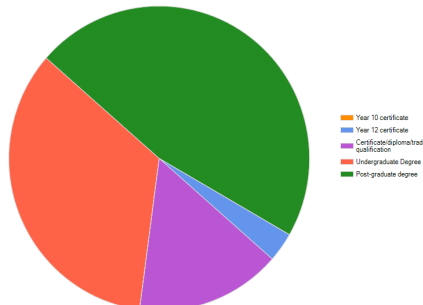
P.E.T Skills retention



90% of respondents continued to use active listening as a parenting tool, and 77% relied on defining 'who owned the problem'.

Education level

Please indicate your highest level of education.



A large number of respondents had tertiary degrees or higher (82%), with 47% having post-graduate qualifications..

Why did the respondents attend a P.E.T. course?

- to improve their parenting skills.
 - to be on the "same page" as their partners when parenting their children.
- Two outlying reasons for attending a P.E.T. course included trying to avoid angry reactions to children, and finding a course that matched the respondent's personal philosophy.

"I want to have a loving and respectful relationship with my children now and in the future."

"The desire was there but not the skills – I was making my father's mistakes and I knew it was up to me to change."

"it would help me learn to listen to her [child's] needs as she was going through the separation of her parents."

Reference:

Lundahl, BW, Tollefson, D, Risser, H, Lovejoy, M. 2008. A Meta-Analysis of Father Involvement in Parent Training. Research on Social Work Practice.

What difference did attending the P.E.T. course make for the respondents?

- They reported they had better communication with their children, through active listening and conflict resolution.
 - A better understanding of the other's perspective/behaviour.
- Two father's noted they were 'less authoritarian'

"my children are much more willing to share their problems with me. I use much less authoritarian force."

"Change of attitude about a child's motivations"

What difference has attending the P.E.T. course made for the respondents' family?

- Calmer, more peaceful, cooperative and harmonious households
- There was a benefit of a consistent P.E.T. approach to parenting with their partner..
- A better relationship with their children,
- Greater empathy and understanding of their child's perspective.

"It has brought my wife closer to me as for the kids we have this understanding that we never had before – I listen to their problems and they listen to what I want of them."

A relatively high percentage of men attend Parent Effectiveness Training courses. What did the respondents think a)

attracted men to the courses;

Respondents felt that men may see how effective the P.E.T. approach was when mothers attended the course first. Other reasons included: wanting to be better Dads, breaking the pattern from their own fathers, and an acknowledgement of the expectation of an increased role of fathers in their children's lives.

and b) men found valuable about the P.E.T. course?

The most frequently theme was that men wanted to break the parenting pattern – that they wanted a different or better relationship than that with their father. This was followed by improvement in relationships, with both children and partner; and a third theme was the skills learnt in P.E.T.

"It [P.E.T.] helps break the paradigm that fathers are supposed to be authoritarian and disciplinarian"

"That it's not about being permissive or strict, and that we don't have to hide our true emotions from our children."

Conclusion

- Men want an alternative to being, or being seen as, authoritarian or the 'disciplinarian'
- That men value the P.E.T. approach, with the emphasis on relationship skills and listening skills
- The respondents retained many of the communication skills taught in P.E.T.
- That relationships with their children (and partners), are important to fathers
- the high response rate may reflect the value the respondents felt they gained from attending a P.E.T. course
- That fathers were **not** discouraged from attending a parenting course if it was called Parent Effectiveness Training, and in fact may be attracted to its name, skills and philosophy.
- Although the education level of respondents was greater than the Australian average, (reflecting Canberra's demographic), there was still a desire and/or need to attend a parenting course such as P.E.T. Such courses must therefore be **universally** available, to help families throughout Australia.