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## Stay True to Family Support

by Carl J. Dunst

*Principles can be your compass for staying true to family support—but only if you use them at every turn. Here's how.*

**F**amily support principles are statements of beliefs and values about how supports and resources ought to be made available to parents and other family members, and how family support program staff should interact with and treat families.<sup>1</sup> The adoption of family support principles as guiding beliefs distinguishes family support programs from other, more traditional, types of human services programs. However, adoption of—and use of and adherence to—family support principles means much more than simply hanging a list of belief statements on the wall of a center, or publishing the principles in a program brochure.

A few years ago, I introduced the principles of family support practice to a group of family support program staff members who had formed a consortium of programs. I explained the historical evolution of the principles, the reasons why principles are so important, and how guiding beliefs can be used as standards against which program practices and practitioner behavior can be judged. After my presentation, the meeting facilitator asked the group if it wanted to adopt the principles. One participant objected to the word “equality” in one of the principles; she said that “everyone knows families are not equals with professionals.” The word was removed by group consensus, the members voted to adopt the principles in modified form, and the group moved on to the next agenda item.

Comments made at the meeting and elsewhere, along with observations of many of the consortium members and their program staff before, during, and after the meeting, make clear that they then had, and still have, no clue whatsoever about the foundations, meaning, intent, and value of family support principles. They expended literally no time or effort on understanding the meaning of the principles before or after adopting

them, nor did they engage in any substantive conversations about how the principles could be used to inform practice.

More than 20 years of developing and evaluating parenting and family support programs teaches us that much more needs to be done if principles are to be used as belief statements for guiding the development and implementation of program practices. Taking the lessons learned from these efforts, I have developed a three-level process for facilitating the adoption of, application of, and adherence to family support principles: in short form, the AAA of family support.

### ***Adopting Principles: Planning a Road Trip***

The Chinese proverb, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” perhaps best describes the pathway to becoming a family support program. The first step in the journey requires adopting guiding beliefs: selecting family support principles, understanding their meaning, and deciding how they will be used to guide program practices and define expected staff behavior.

The process of adopting principles as guiding beliefs and program standards is akin to planning a trip. The process “maps out” where you plan to go and the roads you will take to get there. The first step is deciding which principles your program will use as belief and value statements. Review the many available lists of principles and identify those most aligned with a family-centered philosophy and approach to working with families.<sup>2</sup>

The processes employed by Family Support America and the Family, Infant and Preschool Program of Morganton, N.C., as part of their respective efforts to adopt family support principles as value statements, illustrate two different ways of arriving at similar destinations. Family Support America's 1996 principles

of family support practice are a fifth-generation compilation of belief statements that have evolved over the course of some 15 years. The board of directors of the Family Resource Coalition adopted the first set of principles in 1981, at about the time the organization was founded. These principles, which were the focus of discussions among board members and others, shaped and influenced the restatement of the principles a few years later, and then again in the late 1980s, the early 1990s, and the mid 1990s.

The current version of the principles (Table 1) was the culmination of the collective input of the Best Practices Project Steering Committee. The committee's work began in 1992 and was completed

with the publication of *Guidelines for Family Support Practice* in 1996.

At about the time that the Family Resource Coalition was founded, the staff of the Family, Infant and Preschool Program (FIPP) began to transform their program from a deficit-based one that focused only on children to a strengths-based, family-centered program. One factor that contributed to this transformation was the adoption of principles that emphasized strengths-based practices, empowerment, and partnership. In the mid 1980s, FIPP staff and parents, over a three-month period, examined principles proposed by others,<sup>3</sup> resulting in an expanded list of guiding beliefs. Staff and program participants updated these principles in the early

1990s, and subsequently did so again based on available research,<sup>4</sup> along with the results of a delphi study of FIPP parents. The fourth-generation principles currently used by the FIPP staff are shown in Table 2.

Selecting principles is a good start, but you must go at least one step further and reach a common understanding of the meaning and intent of the principles. This occurs when program participants and staff members engage in dialogue about the meaning and intent of the values embedded in each principle, i.e., taking the key terms of each principle and reaching agreement on what these terms mean. For example, what does "respect" mean? What does it "look like" in practice? What behaviors would staff members and families need to display to demonstrate (mutual) respect? I have highlighted the terms in Family Support America's (Table 1) and FIPP's (Table 2) lists of principles that require definition to promote common understanding.

One further step can make your principles even more understandable and useful. The process of taking concepts like "respect" and "equality" and coming to a common understanding is called operationalization.<sup>5</sup> One of the best ways to employ this process is to develop *practice indicators* for each principle; these indicators then become the behavioral standards against which actual practices are judged. You develop practice indicators by crafting examples of practices that are logically derived from each principle. This process results in a program-specific list of family support practices that mirror the intent of each program principle. This list typically includes two or more indicators for each principle that clarify what that principle means for your program in day-to-day practice. Table 3 shows two of FIPP's principle and three indicators for each that make the principles' intent more concrete. (See also Family Support America's *How Are We Doing?* toolkit, p. 45.)

T A B L E 1

***Family Support America's Principles of Family Support Practice***

1. Staff and families **work together** in relationships based on **equality** and **respect**.
2. Staff **enhance** families' **capacity to support** the growth and development of all family members—adults, youth, and children.
3. Families are **resources** to their own members, to other families, to programs, and to communities.
4. Programs **affirm** and **strengthen** families' cultural, racial, and linguistic **identities** and **enhance** their ability to function in a multicultural society.
5. Programs are **embedded** in their communities and contribute to the **community-building** process.
6. Programs advocate with families for services and systems that are **fair**, **responsive**, and **accountable** to the families served.
7. Practitioners work with families to **mobilize** formal and informal resources to support family development.
8. Programs are **flexible** and continually **responsive** to emerging family and community issues.
9. Principles of family support are **modeled** in all program activities, including planning, governance, and administration.

Family Support America (2001) *Guidelines for Family Support Practice*, 2nd ed. (Chicago).

### ***Applying Principles: Motoring Along***

Application of principles means using them, and the practice indicators, as the standards against which day-to-day practices and decisions are judged. Principles and practice indicators are useful only to the extent that they are modeled in all program activities (see Family Support America Principle 9, Table 1) and used as a guide to ensure you are traveling along the right road.

Principles and practice indicators have many different day-to-day uses. For example, you may be thinking about implementing a new parent education program: How do you decide if it is the best choice for your program? Your principles and practice indicators enable you to assess the fit between the implicit or explicit assumptions of the parenting program and the belief statements adopted by your program. If the parent education program fares poorly when checked against your indicators, you probably want to think twice about implementing it and taking your program off course. If the program passes your road test, move ahead.

Principles and practice indicators also are useful when deciding how to implement program activities. Your program probably offers some type of parenting advice in response to requests for information from program participants. How do you ensure that the ways in which advice is given strengthen, rather than weaken, parenting competence and confidence? Ways to accomplish this include affirming what parents already know and do effectively (see Family Support America Principle 2, Table 1), and having parents use their parenting assets as a context for embedding requested information (see FIPP Principle 8, Table 2).

Principles and practice indicators also can be used to better understand the ways in which program or staff practices have desired or undesired effects. For

example, you have just observed two staff members working with different parents. You notice that one interaction went well and the other seemed strained. How do you isolate the factors associated with these two different outcomes? List your principles down the left side of a sheet of paper and mark off two columns, one for each staff/parent interaction. Take one principle at a time and, for each episode, comment on the manner in which the interactions were characterized by features consistent or inconsistent with the principles. You will be surprised at how illuminating this type of case study analysis is with respect to the factors associated with desired and unwanted outcomes.

The most effective family support programs use their family support principles and indicators as sounding boards to assess program decisions and staff practices. Experience tells us that if programs do not use their principles and practice indicators as standards day-in and day-out, slipping will occur, and old practices slowly will seep back into your program without you even realizing it.

### ***Adhering To Principles: Reaching Your Destination***

Adherence to adopted beliefs and practices refers to the extent to which program participants judge their experiences as being consistent with family support principles. Obtaining participant feedback about program practices is the only way to determine if you have reached this desired outcome.

I know that someone who is reading this is saying, "But you can't trust parents' beliefs, they're too subjective or biased." Let me illustrate why this assertion is unfounded. Imagine you're buying a car, and the car dealer promised you that the car would "deliver" on any number of things you were expecting from it. Now imagine that you have been driving the car for six months. Would you go back to

the car dealer and ask him or her to judge whether the car met your expectations? Of course not! You, the consumer, are the only person who can make that judgment.

Family appraisals of family support programs are no different; they are simply more complicated. If your program has adopted and uses family support principles as performance standards and behavioral promises, you would expect parents to report that staff members treat them and their families in ways consistent with your principles.

How do you determine if your program has adhered to its principles? My colleagues and I have measured adherence in three ways, and there certainly are other ways, as well. First, we have interviewed program participants about their experiences, and used what they related to independently rate the degree of program and staff adherence to principles.<sup>6</sup> Second, we have conducted focus groups with program participants, in which they described their experiences with a program and its staff; we then used rating scales of practice indicators to assess the degree of adherence to principles.<sup>7</sup> Third, we have incorporated statements of family support practice items into survey format, and have asked parents to rate their treatment by program staff by indicating the extent to which each statement is true on a scale varying from "not at all true" to "always true".<sup>8</sup>

What level of adherence proves that a program operates in ways that it purports to operate? Consumer loyalty research tells us that, if consumers are to judge the product or service to be of sufficient quality for them to become "repeat customers," the largest majority of indicators must receive the highest rating. I'm a stickler for striving for and expecting excellence. If a program claims to be a family support program, and has adopted family support principles as guiding beliefs, then I think that at least 90-95

percent of all family support principle indicators should receive the highest rating on the scale used to measure adherence. Furthermore, one would expect that at different mile markers along the trip, you would find parents' judgments rated similarly high, indicating that your vehicle is still well tuned.

### ***New Initiatives: New Roads Ahead***

Two initiatives currently underway hold promise for providing further guidance on mapping the adoption and application of, and adherence to, the family support principles described in this article. One is Family Support America's Evidence Along the Way National Family Support Evaluation Project; the other is the development of the Parenting and Family Support Program Practices Scales, which I am currently field-testing.

Evidence Along the Way seeks to enhance the ability of family support programs to strengthen their practices by building their capacity to conduct evaluations and use evaluation data to influence program operations. This initiative involves the development of an evaluation approach and set of procedures to measure adoption of and adherence to family support principles. It also will reveal the ways principles can be used to influence both program offerings and how supports and resources are made available to families. The initiative uses a participatory theory of change approach<sup>9</sup> to embed family support principles into the evaluation process; this clarifies how program offerings that are provided in a family-centered manner promote and enhance positive child, parent, and family functioning. Evidence Along the Way holds great promise for improving the planning and implementation of family support evaluations.

Parenting and Family Support Program Practice Scales<sup>10</sup> measure different dimensions and features of program practices. The scales include indicators

<b>T A B L E 2</b>	
<b><i>Family, Infant and Preschool Program's Guiding Principles</i></b>	
<b>Staff interactions with families are guided by the belief that:</b>	
<b>1.</b>	Families and family members are treated with <b><i>dignity and respect</i></b> at all times.
<b>2.</b>	The staff is <b><i>sensitive, knowledgeable, and responsive</i></b> to family, cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity.
<b>3.</b>	Family <b><i>choice and decision making</i></b> occurs at all levels of participation in the program.
<b>4.</b>	Information necessary for families to make informed choices is shared in a <b><i>sensitive, complete, and unbiased</i></b> manner.
<b>5.</b>	Practices are based on family-identified <b><i>desires, priorities, and preferences</i></b> .
<b>6.</b>	The staff provides supports, resources, and services to families in a <b><i>flexible, responsive, and individualized</i></b> manner.
<b>7.</b>	A broad range of informal, community, and formal <b><i>supports and resources</i></b> are used for achieving family-identified outcomes.
<b>8.</b>	The staff builds on child, parent, and family <b><i>strengths, assets, and interests</i></b> as the primary way of strengthening family functioning.
<b>9.</b>	Staff-family relationships are characterized by <b><i>partnerships and collaboration</i></b> based on <b><i>mutual trust, respect, and problem solving</i></b> .
<b>10.</b>	The staff uses <b><i>helpgiving styles</i></b> that <b><i>support and strengthen</i></b> family functioning.
<small>Family, Infant and Preschool Program (2001) <i>Guiding Principles</i> (Morganton, N.C.). Retrieved August 27, 2002, from <a href="http://www.fipp.org/foundation.html">www.fipp.org/foundation.html</a>.</small>	

that measure program foundations (mission and principles), program paradigms and premises, parent education practices, parenting support practices, family and community resource practices, and community engagement practices. The program foundations scales include (among other things) measures of adoption, visibility, and use of as well as adherence to family support principles.

There will be two versions of the scales: the first is a self-assessment tool for program staff to use to determine how well

they are doing and to identify areas for program improvement. The second is a research and evaluation tool for measuring the fidelity of program implementation, and for relating variations in program practices to variations in outcomes. The self-assessment version of the scale holds promise for promoting engagement in the kinds of activities described throughout this article for strengthening the adoption and application of, and adherence to, family support principles.

## A Critical Juncture

We are at an interesting—and critical—juncture in the journey called the family support movement. The call for better measures of family support program practices and outcomes has been voiced for more than 15 years. However, the call has been largely ignored. Can we afford to continue on the same road we have been on and assume that what we say we do is, actually, what we do (without any evidence to support such claims)? Or should we take a different road and do a better job of documenting that our practices reflect our principles, and evaluating whether the outcomes associated with family support-aligned practices are better than those that are not so aligned?

If you answered yes to the second question, AAA is one way to map a new path for traversing your future. Happy trails. 🌟



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### TABLE 3

#### Examples of Possible Indicators for Two Family Support Principles

<b>Principle:</b>	<b>Family choice and decision making occur at all levels of program participation.</b>
<b>Indicator:</b>	Staff members engage parents in conversations about options and the consequences of different choices.
<b>Indicator:</b>	Staff members provide parents with information necessary for them to make informed choices.
<b>Indicator:</b>	Staff members and parents work together to develop a course of action to achieve a desired goal or obtain a desired resource.
<b>Principle:</b>	<b>Staff members provide supports, resources, and services to families in a flexible, responsive, and individualized manner.</b>
<b>Indicator:</b>	Staff members rearrange their meeting times with parents in response to parents' changing work schedules.
<b>Indicator:</b>	Staff members provide advice and assistance in response to parents' requests and desires.
<b>Indicator:</b>	Staff members tailor the ways in which they work with parents to fit each family's specific situations and circumstances.

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