

# The Parenting Newsletter Project: Helping New and Expectant Parents Raise Healthy Children



**“Your newsletters were very enlightening. When I felt the tension growing, I would sit down and read them. They were very calming. When I felt stressed, instead of yelling at my precious baby, I sat down and used the different alternatives in the newsletter.”**

—Columbia County parent



## Situation

Many of the concerns that trouble today’s young people and society in general—from poor school performance to juvenile violence—have their roots in the way parents have raised their children. Parenting education can help, but often, parents who most need the information are the least likely to come to a class on the topic.

Moreover, many problems begin early in life, during the prenatal period, when expectant parents may engage in risky pregnancy behaviors that can permanently harm their child, such as smoking or using drugs.

## Response

The University of Wisconsin-Extension Family Living Programs has produced a very inexpensive parenting education program that is surprisingly effective. It has been delivered to nearly half of all Wisconsin families with newborns for two decades.

UW-Extension produces and distributes three series of educational newsletters for parents—*Preparing to Parent*, *Parenting the First Year* and *Parenting the Second and Third Years*.

These newsletter series are age-paced. For example, the parents of a 24-month-old toddler receive information on the physical, intellectual and social skills being developed by children this exact age, and learn ways to promote optimal child development. Because the newsletters are written at the fifth-grade reading level, 91% of U.S. adults can read them in either English or Spanish.

Parents receive the newsletters free, usually in the mail. *Parenting the First Year* is received monthly, while *Parenting the Second and Third Years* is available bimonthly. The *Preparing to Parent* newsletters are delivered directly to expectant parents during prenatal office visits, reinforcing the advice of health care professionals. UW-Extension offices in 61 counties coordinate the distribution of the newsletters with community partners, including approximately 80 Kiwanis clubs, 90 hospitals and health departments, and dozens of other businesses and service clubs.

In 2010, UW-Extension began offering a new option for newsletter delivery. Electronic delivery is now available free to the 72 county Extension offices around the state, their local partners and the families they serve. If they choose electronic delivery, parents will receive an e-mail each month with a link to the newsletter specific to their child’s age.

## Outcomes

The *Parenting* newsletter project has produced some important outcomes for Wisconsin families.

- Parents rate the *Parenting the First Year* newsletter series “very useful” as a source of child rearing advice more often than any other source.
- Parents who receive *Parenting the First Year*, compared to those who don’t, have beliefs significantly less like those of child-abusing parents, and report spanking or slapping their babies significantly less often.
- Approximately 23,000 families, about one-third of all new parents in Wisconsin, received *Parenting the First Year* newsletters last year. An additional 13,000 Wisconsin families received *Parenting the Second and Third Years* last year, and over 1,500 received the *Preparing to Parent* newsletters. More than 700 families received the Spanish language version of the newsletters.
- Parents in socioeconomic risk categories (low income, low education, single, teenage or isolated parents) were significantly more likely than others to report that, “Reading the newsletters caused me to slap or spank my child less often.”
- Approximately 570,000 families have received *Parenting the First Year* since the project began 20 years ago. This means that approximately one in every ten Wisconsin residents—and almost half of Wisconsin children—have been raised by a parent who received this parenting education program.

And the benefits of the *Parenting* newsletter project are not confined to Wisconsin.

- Eleven other states and two other countries (Canada and England) also use the newsletters.
- Between 30 and 40 people read the *Parenting* newsletters online every day (about 13,000 per year).
- In England a randomized clinical trial of the British version of *Parenting the First Year* showed that mothers receiving the newsletter, compared to the control group, experienced fewer and less intense “daily hassles,” and had more appropriate expectations for their infant’s behavior. These results were published in the journal *Pediatrics*.

### Estimating the economic benefits of Extension’s Parenting newsletters

Rough estimates of the economic benefits Wisconsin has experienced through the UW-Extension *Parenting* newsletter project can be made from evaluation findings. Although a true economic cost-benefit analysis has not been completed, the estimated benefit ratio is \$6.75. That means for every dollar spent on this program, approximately \$7 in future spending by the child welfare, health care, educational, police and judicial systems may be avoided. To learn more about these economic benefits, go to <http://fyi.uwex.edu/using-parenting-newsletters/economic-value-of-the-newsletters/>

### Inserts for the Parenting newsletters

- *Parenting Future Readers* is a set of 12, age-paced literacy guides that provide parents with useful advice on how to positively influence their child’s language and literacy development. A Spanish version is also available.
- *Parenting Your Unique Child* is a set of 12, age-paced temperament guides that provide parents with advice on parenting children with different temperaments.

To view the *Parenting* newsletters online, go to <http://parenting.uwex.edu>

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**“The newsletters have been very useful to me because I have no friends with children and very little input. It helps to know what to expect and what is normal behavior.”**

—Dane County parent