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Parent Education: “Prepare the Child for the Path, Not the Path for the Child”

by Candace J. Eaton



Candace J. Eaton describes why parent education is important and discusses a number of parent-education approaches and programs that currently exist in Maine. She argues that we need to increase access to research-supported programs, parent-education classes, and support groups to all geographic areas of the state and all populations. In this era of reduced funding, Eaton recommends continuous evaluation of program outcomes and the limitation of funding to programs and approaches that show positive improvements. 

The phone rings and the caller asks, “I need to take a parenting course, do you have any coming right up?” As a provider, you ask yourself: What type of parenting class are they looking to attend? How old are their children? Where do they live? What is their family composition? Is the caller self-motivated or mandated to attend a class or series of classes? These are just pieces of the information you must learn so you can make the best recommendation for this parent or caregiver. Being able to refer this caller also hinges on the local *availability* of appropriate parent education opportunities—another issue altogether.

Parenting education is a continuum of learning for all adults involved in the family. It also can refer to classes that teach young people the skills they will need as they think about becoming parents. In this article, “parent” refers to any guardian or primary caregiver of a child or adolescent. Effective programs work with parents and caregivers to increase the problem-solving and parenting skills necessary to nurture a healthy family. Research shows that effective parent training and family interventions promote protective factors for both parents and children (Lundahl and Harris 2006). Protective factors include nurturing and attachment, knowledge of parenting and of child and youth development, parental resilience, social connections, and concrete supports for parents (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2009). This article reviews the need for parent education and describes some of the effective parent education approaches being applied in Maine.

WHY IS PARENT EDUCATION IMPORTANT?

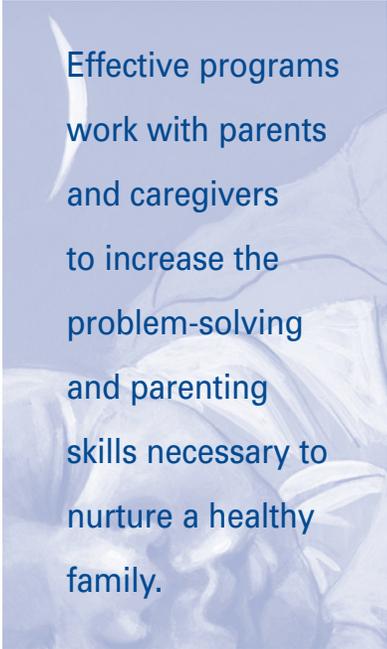
Sometimes parenting can be frustrating and the skills of parenting are not often intuitive. Child-rearing patterns are influenced by a personal sense of competence, an understanding of child development combined with each child’s unique temperament, and the cultural traditions of the community. For better or worse, most adults learned their approach to parenting from their own parents, who learned from their parents, who learned from their parents. Some readers of a certain age remember that Dr. Benjamin Spock’s parenting guidance book was in the bookcase of

nearly every home in suburban America. Today you may find *What to Expect* or Drs. Sears and Sears.

Many of us would like to think we turned out just fine from the parenting we received as children. But in the past decade, research has shown that there are many factors in healthy parenting and healthy children. We have learned that 80 percent of the child’s brain development occurs in the first three years of life. We have also learned that what happens at home during the first three years of life can profoundly influence the later physical health or illness of an adolescent or adult. Strengthening parent-child relationships and honing parenting skills are of critical importance to support healthy growth and development in those early years of a child’s life.

One important influence on parenting is the fundamental change in the institution of marriage and its effect on the structure of families and child births since 1960. Today, nearly 25 percent of all children are born outside of marriage, and the percentage of single-parent households has more than tripled in the past 50 years. Within the context of changing and blending family arrangements, it is more imperative to ensure that children have safe, dependable, and nurturing environments.

Where we once were born, grew up, and continued to live in our familiar communities, we are now increasingly mobile, moving away from our extended families to continue schooling or find employment. At the same time, since much of our state is rural, those families who do stay often live in isolation from neighbors and community activities. Although the Internet connects us in many ways, providing access to family and parenting resources, some rural markets are still not served well and remain disconnected from help and support.



Effective programs work with parents and caregivers to increase the problem-solving and parenting skills necessary to nurture a healthy family.

WHAT MAKES PARENT EDUCATION EFFECTIVE?

Effective parent education strengthens and builds on the relationship between parent and child. Quality family-strengthening programs nurture existing parenting skills, recognizing that parents want to do the best possible job at preparing their children for the future. Grounded in research and using well-trained instructors, these formal programs encourage parents to be effective role models. They provide child development information, seize opportunities for parents to practice new skills, and create supportive communities and positive relationships within families. In my role as an educator, I have found that most parents who seek parenting classes are motivated, humble, willing to try new things, persistent, grateful for the guidance, and are willing to laugh at themselves throughout the process. By making parenting education a formal, statewide offering, we have the potential to serve *all* families, from all walks of life. Learning together helps caregivers to enhance their skills and improve parent/child communication. This, in turn, can foster positive childhood experiences and often prevent child abuse and neglect.

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It is important to note that effective parent education depends on the quality of the educator, the educational materials, the setting in which it is provided, and the timing and flexibility to meet the parent's needs. Instructors need to be culturally sensitive to the specific population learning new skills. Qualified instructors may be social workers, counselors, public school educators, nurses, family and consumer science teachers, and trained facilitators and paraprofessionals. A well-trained instructor will enhance each family's capacity to support the growth and development of all family

members—adults, children, and youth. Skilled practitioners work with families to help them engage formal and informal resources to support healthy family development—a marker of a program's efficacy.

WHEN DO FAMILIES ACCESS PARENT EDUCATION?

Parents seek guidance throughout their child's life from many places. Physicians provide prenatal care and education for parents about the developing fetus and health-related questions. The information provided during optional hospital-based childbirth classes prepares them for childbirth and the early days after the baby comes home. Some local hospitals include "Boot Camp for New Dads" as a component of their childbirth series.

In Maine, first-time parents may participate in a home-based educational program that is universally available to families enrolled during the prenatal period or within the first three months of the infant's life. Healthy Families, Parents Are Teachers Too, and Parents as Teachers are three model programs available for these new parents to gain confidence and learn about child development from pregnancy through age five. Some public health and community health nurses are available to make home visits to assist families with infants facing various medical challenges. All of the home-visiting programs offer periodic child development assessments, parent support and education, and connections to other community programs and resources. These community-based home-visiting programs are not an arm of government interfering in the private lives of families. Program services are designed to support family functioning through trusting relationships, developing or increasing problem-solving skills, and working with the family's natural support systems.

Parents may seek assistance in dealing with new ages and stages of development, such a child who is teething or sibling rivalry when a second child is born. They may look for help when confronted with biting or temper tantrums. They may want someone to talk to about how little sleep they've gotten. They compare notes and look for help with toilet training and

sleeping through the night. New parents seek information for new circumstances. They seek information about their infant, their school-age child, and they seek guidance about setting limits with their adolescent.

Parents seek parenting education at multiple points in their own lives as well as those of their children. Changes in family dynamics may send adults scurrying to find solutions to new problems created by death, divorce, remarriage, adoption, military deployment, mental illness, or allegations of child abuse. Grand families and other kinship families may struggle with new responsibilities in raising grand-children, nieces, and nephews. Family court judges and child welfare officials may mandate or “strongly recommend” that families in transition participate in structured parent educational opportunities. Counselors may suggest a parenting class to help with the stresses parents are experiencing in communicating with their child.

SELF-STUDY OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS

Maine families may access resources for self-study, including curricula, books, magazines, media, and the Internet. One avenue for support includes the educational materials and self-study opportunities provided through national universities. More locally, the University of Maine Cooperative Extension offers *The Growing Years* (www.umext.maine.edu/parent-center/parents/tgy.htm), fact sheets that provide guidance on topical issues related to the ages and stages of infants and young children through the age of five. These materials are mailed directly to the home to provide anticipatory guidance to parents and caregivers on the developmental progress of their child. Each fact sheet arrives “just in time” with suggestions designed for the baby’s age and developmental milestones.

Another example of parent resources is Born Learning™ (www.bornlearning.org), a partnership of Civitas, the Ad Council, American Academy of Pediatrics, and United Way of America. Born Learning™ helps parents, caregivers and communities create quality early learning opportunities for children birth to age five with online tools and educational information for the various ages and stages. Many

examples provide opportunities for learning on the go and in the everyday world.

Many parents are seeking resources—a quick tip sheet, a book or video, that they can read or watch, to learn how to “fix the problem.” Community and family resource center libraries have a wealth of resources on parenting education, which are enhanced when a parent educator is available for drop-in advice. Drop-in hours give families the opportunity to access the knowledge of a trained educator on specific behavioral issues and seek referrals and connections to other social services. Online resources offer classes on topics like anger management, sibling rivalry, and self-esteem. Today’s families are addressing tough issues, and many are looking for support; all can benefit from connections to trained professionals either in person or on the Internet.

COMPONENTS AND EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY-BASED PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In some communities, parents may access parenting classes in a weekly series, offered through the local adult education program or through a community social service agency. Self-motivated participants may seek this information and support on their own, while others are referred through the courts or local child welfare office. Community-based education is best provided in non-threatening environments that are comfortable and convenient. These programs are also best offered with a “public face,” that is, in a place that is acceptable to all—such as at home, a school, a library, or at a place of worship. Community-based family resource centers are ideal because they provide an array of services and activities that are integrated, comprehensive, flexible, and responsive to community identified needs. Research shows that high-quality, effective family resource centers will include *all* of the following: parent education, child development activities, resource and referral, drop-in availability, peer-to-peer supports, life skills coaching, and advocacy. Right now, there are less than a handful of these comprehensive family resource centers in Maine.

Parent educators may choose from several different models of parenting education. The *development*

content model provides topics of interest to parents of a specific age range. The *issues model* may include specific topics, such as sibling rivalry or stepfamilies, which do not tie specifically a child's age to the developmental stage within the issue. *Communication models* seek to enhance communication between parents and children, or communication among all of the adults in a child's life. An *experiential model*, such as using RealCare™ computerized infants for students learning infant care, provide students with a realistic simulated parenting experience.

Each education model has a role in providing a full range of educational opportunities to meet the needs of today's families. Successful programs understand that knowledge of lifespan development is as essential as knowledge of child development in order to understand the needs of a new parent. Adults attending a series of classes indicate learning is enhanced when all of the participants have common needs or similar characteristics (Colosi and Dunifon 2003).

Parent coaching or parent mentoring may be available on a limited, cost-per-hour basis, in person, by phone, or online. A relatively new response to meeting the needs and challenges of today's families, parent coaching, offers skilled guidance to promote communication and safety within the family's own environment. One example in the Portland area is offered by Youth Alternatives Ingraham; Parenting and Family Education: Professional Coaching for Parents is offered by one-hour sessions for a modest fee. Parents decide how many or few sessions they will need. Families will find other coaching opportunities online.

Facilitated family support groups are historically the most common opportunity to learn new parenting skills. As noted earlier, family composition is varied and can change rapidly. We have traditional families—biological mom and dad. We have single-parent families, same sex families, blended families—his and/or hers and maybe ours. Foster and adoptive families step in to care for children whose families are unable to do so safely. An increasing number of children are living in families caring for children of relatives, referred to as “grandfamilies” or “kinship families.” Facilitated support groups with a trained parent educator provide these families with access to increased problem-solving

options, and an important part of these classes is the peer support families receive in addition to mini-lessons provided by the facilitator.

EVALUATING FAMILY STRENGTHENING PROGRAMS

Frequently, grant funding sources require parent education programs to include evaluation tools that measure outcomes and changes in behavior. A large body of research supports the emphasis on parent education that focuses on family strengths and resilience rather than risk factors. This approach reinforces existing protective factors instead of dwelling on family weaknesses. Strength-based programs include family-skills training and activities to help children and parents communicate effectively and develop culturally appropriate strategies consistent with family beliefs. In addition to being well planned in their development and administration, parent education programs need to have solid evaluation plans that go beyond measuring clients' satisfaction to directly measure program goals and objectives and changes in parents' behaviors.

Evidence-based and evidence-informed are terms awarded to programs that are grounded in research and have undergone rigorous testing. Registries of evidence-informed programs, including Blueprints for Violence Prevention, the National Registry of Evidenced-based Programs and Practices (NREPP), and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) evaluate programs and designate successful parenting programs as exemplary or model programs, effective programs, and/or promising programs. Each program focuses on specific risk and protective factors. These curricula vary, and some programs require specific training for group facilitators.

Families that have many stressors may benefit from a combination of individual and group parent training that develops skills that emphasize social connections and the parents' ability to access community supports. Allowing parents to practice new skills with their children during parent-training sessions is consistently associated with greater effectiveness. This type of training may be more effective when serving families in need of specific services and skill development.

WHAT IS CURRENTLY AVAILABLE IN MAINE?

From too little information to too much information, families are bombarded with media sound bites: “read my book,” “play my video,” “do this,” and “don’t do that.” What’s a parent to do? The state of Maine is working to provide a common message, in a consistent manner, using common models that are research-informed.

Touchpoints™

The first approach is a comprehensive team approach based on a core set of principles. Many home visitors, public health nurses, maternal and child health nurses, pediatricians and early care educators are trained in the Touchpoints™ (www.touchpoints.org) approach to help Maine parents reaffirm their priorities and strengths as parents. Touchpoints™, developed by T. Berry Brazelton, noted pediatrician and author, provides parents with many teachable moments based on the cues of their infant and toddler. This approach empowers parents to discover their effectiveness as parents, guiding them through their children’s predictable developmental events (touchpoints) to support healthy child development.

Children develop their skills in many different areas at the same time. When children show a sudden burst in one area of development, they often backslide or regress in another area of development. While this is a positive sign of development, parents and providers might find themselves disagreeing with each other.

The essence of Touchpoints™ training is to provide anticipatory guidance with a focus on the common interest in the child by both parents and providers. This approach focuses on helping parents to learn what to do, rather than telling parents what not to do. It is an approach that trains providers to listen to what families need and to support parents’ discovery of what is best for their children. The Touchpoints™ approach enhances the competence of parents and builds strong family-child relationships, laying the foundation for their child’s healthy development.

Maine is emphasizing the development of a sustainable training infrastructure for service providers and recommends adoption of the Brazelton Touchpoints™

as an evidenced-based approach for enhancing the competence of parents and strengthening the parent-child relationship. Currently, all of the home visitors in Maine have been trained in Touchpoints™, using a team of well-respected Maine trainers. Based on 60 years of infant research and practice by Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, this approach has reached more than 13,000 providers in more than 80 communities, and more than one million families since 1996. Families can supplement this guidance with self-study through books and videos authored by T. Berry Brazelton and the Brazelton Touchpoints Center, available in several family resource centers and municipal libraries.

In addition to being well planned in their development and administration, parent education programs need to have solid evaluation plans that go beyond measuring clients’ satisfaction to directly measure program goals and objectives and changes in parents’ behaviors.

Period of Purple Crying®

The second model adopted by Maine is the Period of Purple Crying® (www.dontshake.org/sbs.php?topNavID=4&subNavID=32), which was developed by the National Center on Shaken Baby Syndrome based on 25 years of research on normal infant crying conducted by Ronald G. Barr and others. This program helps parents and caregivers to understand the natural, yet frustrating features of normal crying in infants that can lead to shaking or abuse. This evidenced-based shaken-baby-syndrome prevention program includes a 10-minute DVD and full-color 11-page booklet intended to be given to parents of new infants in the hospital. The message is clear, memorable, and meaningful, and is designed to be interesting and relevant to both men and

women. This program approaches the prevention of shaken-baby syndrome through education about normal infant development, specifically, about crying in normal infants, rather than being limited to warnings of the negative consequences of shaking.

Thirty-one of Maine's 33 hospitals have been trained in this abusive head-trauma prevention program and will provide educational information to all parents after the birth of their new infant. A nurse will watch the DVD with the family and answer any questions. The family will then be given a copy of the DVD to take home, to review at their convenience, and to share with all future caregivers of their child.

Universal access to parent education and family support is an investment priority for the state of Maine.

As families are frequently overwhelmed by the amount of information provided during their brief hospital stay when the baby is born, trained home visitors and public health/maternal health nurses will review this material during a later home visit. Maine's 16 countywide child abuse prevention councils will provide public education and training to the community, so that all adults will understand that some babies will experience periods of inconsolable crying. The Maine Children's Trust, Maine Children's Alliance, and the Barbara Bush Center have begun a public service educational campaign on local radio stations to inform the general public about the prevention of shaken-baby syndrome. The Maine Children's Trust is collaborating with the National Center on Shaken Baby Syndrome to evaluate this broad-based community education approach to reduce abusive infant head trauma.

RealCare® Parenting Program

The third model, RealCare® Parenting Program (formerly known as Baby Think It Over®) (www.realityworks.com/realcare) was developed by RealityWorks, Inc., using a hands-on approach with

a computerized infant simulator that requires realistic care of an infant and reports on exactly how it was cared for. When used in child development or parenting education, a RealCare® baby helps future parents become more confident, capable, and attentive caregivers. By teaching proper infant care skills and providing an around-the-clock interactive experience with a lifelike simulator, the program can be successfully applied to babysitter education and teen pregnancy prevention efforts. We often hear that babies do not come with a manual, yet in this program, they do. Educators teach child development education prior to students participating in the parenting simulation.

In addition to the core child development information provided, specialized demonstration infants teach students about the effects of fetal alcohol syndrome, the effect of drugs, and why shaken-baby syndrome (abusive head trauma) should be prevented. Other lessons incorporate the financial responsibility of parenthood, infant health needs, and readiness for parenthood. Many communities partner with their local child abuse prevention council to provide this educational experience in their schools as a supplement to their *Maine Learning Results* curriculum. This is an ideal way to integrate the community-based presentation of the Period of Purple Crying® with the RealCare® Parenting program.

Co-Parenting Programs

The fourth major approach in Maine provides parents who are separating or divorcing an opportunity to learn how to successfully co-parent their children, by putting the needs of their children at the fore. "Kids First," "For Kids Sake," "Parent Works," or "Moving Forward" are titles of a four-hour workshop held in 15 cities throughout Maine to assist parents with the transition through a family separation. Parents learn that family disruption due to divorce is not a single event, but a series of events. It may involve trial separation, divorce, life in a single-parent family, life with a parent and live-in lover(s), the remarriage of one or both parents, life in a blended family, the breakup of one or both step-parent families, and so on. Parents will learn how divorce affects children, how they can work together to make things easier for their children, and

how other parents have coped in similar situations. They will learn how to deal with conflict without involving the children, make decisions about parenting arrangements, and help children adjust to differences between households. Parents with new partners are encouraged to attend the same workshop.

The annual calendar of classes and locations are posted to the state of Maine Web site (www.courts.state.me.us/maine_courts/specialized/family/parent_edu.html). In addition, Maine's judicial system has published a booklet on their Web site, *A Guide to Making Child-Focused Parenting Time Decisions*, available for free download.

In all 50 states (plus the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands), the judicial system has taken a leadership role in requiring families to learn more about the dynamics of parenting education and family relationships. Funded through the Department of Health and Human Services Access and Visitation Grant Program since 1998, states determine the type of service(s) to be provided. The services must be related to the overall goal of the program, which, according to their Web site, is to "support and facilitate non-custodial parents' access to and visitation of their children" (www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/pubs/2005/reports/prelim_access_visitation_grants/).

COST-BENEFITS OF PARENT EDUCATION TO STRENGTHEN MAINE'S FAMILIES

A cost-benefit analysis by Heckman, Grunewald and Reynolds (2006) can be used to translate the impact of early care into the language of business and economics. Some impacts appear relatively quickly, positively affect parenting, and lead to fewer substantiated cases of abuse and neglect than would have been expected. Other impacts, seen in children as they develop and grow older, take more time to materialize, such as increased graduation rates, reductions in juvenile and adult crime, and higher earnings in the workforce. Cost-benefit analysis not only demonstrates the relative size of benefits to costs, it also shows who benefits. Although the children and parents participating in prevention programs benefit through improved outcomes, the nonparticipating public also

benefits—from higher tax revenues, reduced crime costs, reductions in special education and grade retention (see Trostel and Connors this issue).

The *Invest Early Plan for Maine* (Maine Department of Health and Human Services 2008: 10) outlines a primary goal that "all Maine families will have access to programs that deliver comprehensive, family-centered, culturally sensitive, linguistically competent and collaborative prevention services." This report is the culmination of years of study by Maine's experts in child development. Universal access to parent education and family support is an investment priority for the state of Maine.

In 2006–2007, Maine's 16 countywide child abuse and neglect prevention councils presented their recommendations for strengthening Maine's families through family resource centers to the Governor's Children's Cabinet Task Force on Early Childhood. They reported that most prevention programs, even those that are intense and comprehensive, are relatively less expensive than programs that intervene or treat children who have been abused. However, state funding and support for child abuse prevention has dwindled in recent years, with less than \$140,000 allocated to be shared among the child abuse prevention councils in each of Maine's counties.

CALL TO ACTION

So, how do parents find out what parent education and support is available in their neighborhood? How can we support families in raising children in our community? What is our call to action?

In 1998, Maine convened the Task Force to Study Strategies to Support Parents as Children's First Teachers (Maine Department of Human Services 1998). The task force identified three key strategies to ensure healthy development and school readiness, including (1) home-visiting services for all new parents, (2) support for parents as children's first teachers, and (3) family-support services. The task force recommended specific characteristics of effective home-visiting programs, recommended the development of a core curriculum for parents and caregivers, and identified ways to improve current and community-based services.

In December 2007, the 123rd Legislature in their “Executive Summary of the Commission to Develop a Strategic Priorities Plan for Maine’s Young Children,” recommended investments in strengthening families through comprehensive family support services (Maine Office of Policy and Legal Analysis 2007). The state of Maine supports universal home-visiting services for first-time families through the Fund for Healthy Maine, using tobacco settlement funds. In fiscal year 2008, local home-visiting programs served 2,800 first-time families (Johnson 2009). Level funding and budget cuts have limited the program. It is clear that we need to increase capacity to reach all geographic areas and expand access to parent education through home-visiting programs for the families of all 13,000 new infants born each year.

Funded through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Access and Visitation Grant Program, co-parenting classes are available in only 15 communities. But in the period of April 2009 through April 2010, some communities will only offer the program twice. Co-parenting education provides an affordable, cost-effective form of intervention that not only complements and supports court-connected mediation and visitation supervision programs, but also reduces expenses to the legal system by preventing costly re-litigation by parents in conflict (Supreme Court of Virginia 2000). We must increase capacity for families in transition to access monthly co-parenting classes in every county in Maine.

A partnership of the Maine Children’s Trust and Maine’s community hospitals, the Period of Purple Crying® is a new program introduced in April 2009. Using only private contributions, we were able to launch this evidence-based model. It would be a nominal gesture for the state to actively support the costs of distributing copies of the DVD to parents at the time of delivery to share with other caregivers of their newborn child, particularly in light of the public dollars saved when children do not experience abusive head trauma.

Only eleven of Maine’s 16 child abuse prevention councils currently have the capacity to provide the RealCare® Parenting Program in their local communities. Over the past 10 years, sporadic funding support

for this program has been provided by private foundations and community donations. We need to increase capacity to reach all counties and expand access to every public middle school and high school, as desired by the local community.

The Maine Children’s Trust, the 10 United Ways of Maine, and various other private foundations support additional community-based parent education opportunities sporadically available throughout the state. This may be our most complex challenge. Today, there is an awakened realization of the importance of parent education. We have reduced the stigma of parent education as being for only at-risk families and recognize that families voluntarily want access to education and support year-round. However, many of our state policies ignore this growing body of information.

Parents and caregivers indicate that they want help to develop a long-range view of their actions. They will be better able to focus their sights on the future if their long-term perspective is not lost in the day-to-day issues of today’s family challenges. We need to increase access to parent-education classes and support groups to reach all geographic areas. At a minimum, we should provide access to programs in every county, and this minimum is not currently being met. In this current economic climate, we must require continuous evaluation of program outcomes, and fund only those opportunities that show positive improvements.

All of this returns me to the sub-title of this article. “Prepare the child for the path, not the path for the child” was printed on a paperweight tile given to me by my husband. I frequently remember this motto when challenged to protect children from the fast-paced life they encounter after they leave the womb. Our collective job is to teach our children the skills they need to make good choices every day. As I write this final paragraph, I hear the laughter and engaged conversation of five parents participating in our Positive Parenting class for families with young children down the hall. These are all families seeking additional tools for their parenting toolbox. Two of the parents live in a traditional family with their biological children, one has guardianship of her grandchild, one grandparent lives in a multi-generational household, and one non-custodial parent was “strongly encouraged” to attend. These parents will help

their children to “stop, think, and make a good choice.” That is good advice for us all. It is time for Maine to stop, think, and make the good choice to invest in supporting families. 🐟

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for the Maine Children’s Trust, United Way of Eastern Maine’s Community Impact Council for Families and Children, Statewide Advisory Committee for Communities for Children and Youth, is a member of the Maine Child Abuse Prevention Councils, and formerly served on the Governor’s Task Force on Early Childhood.