COVID-19 Highlights Need for Accessible Parent Training: The Role of Pediatrics and Technology

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Social distancing due to COVID-19 has placed new demands on parents and highlighted a clear need for *highly accessible* parent training (i.e., educational content/programs that impact child outcomes through modifying parenting behavior). Parents are under heightened levels of stress due to school/child care closures coupled with demands, for many parents, to continue working (often at home). While our understanding of family functioning during the pandemic is still emerging, we can surmise that parenting during the pandemic is highly challenging for parents and children, which increases the likelihood of harsh parenting and child behavioral health challenges (e.g., anxiety, disruptive behavior). There is also concern that stress and isolation due to social distancing will/has increased child maltreatment.¹

To combat risk during the COVID-19 pandemic, parents are in need of guidance and support to structure their child's daily routine, provide enriching educational opportunities, and manage children's emotional and behavioral challenges. The nature of social distancing makes seeking, and receiving, help inherently difficult, unfortunately. It is important to recognize, however, that for many parents barriers to connecting with evidence-based parent training were present long before COVID-19 and will persist after the epidemic ends.² There are many parent training programs with a strong evidence base,³ but the reach of these programs is severely limited by barriers such as lack of transportation, stigma associated with seeking help, long waitlists, and lack of program availability. These barriers prevent many families, particularly low-income families, from accessing in-person parent training.²

Technology as an important & emerging solution

Access to technology, particularly Smartphones, plays an important role in making evidence-based parent training accessible; with families at home due to social distancing, Smartphones now play an even more important role than pre-pandemic. Smartphone ownership

in the United States is becoming ubiquitous (81% of adults in the United States own a Smartphone⁴) and is closing the once considerable divide in access to the internet between lower-income and higher-income Americans. For many low-income Americans, Smartphones are their only connection to the internet.⁴ Smartphones connect parents, through text messages and internet access, to an abundance of information, including parenting information.

We know that parents are already using technology, specifically the internet, to obtain parenting information. For instance, in a sample of 160 predominately low-income parents, 75% reported using the internet to obtain parenting information.⁵ While online parenting information is plentiful (e.g., googling “help with child behavior problems” leads to over 600 million results), the degree to which available information is research-informed is highly variable. For instance, in 2015, Drayton et al.⁶ reviewed internet-based information about the common disciplinary practice time-out.³ They found none of the websites provided information about time-out that is consistent with the evidence-based procedure; some webpages also described time-out as ineffective. The authors suggested *not* recommending parents use the internet as a tool for parenting information, and instead suggested pediatricians provide parent training in the office visit or refer parents to behavioral health professionals. Unfortunately, the barriers listed above, and COVID-19, make this challenging.

Luckily, internet-based resources that provide *research-informed* parenting information are beginning emerging. Websites from professional organizations (e.g., the American Academy of Pediatrics) are now providing helpful information to guide parenting practices (some even have video-based content), but parents need help finding these high-quality resources (see Table 1). Moreover, there is a shift to make evidence-based parent training programs available online. These programs are similar to face-to-face parent training programs as they are multi-session and

provide the same guidance, only through video-based content instead of in-person instruction. One such program is listed in Table 1 and similar programs are being evaluated.²

The Role of Pediatricians and Specific Recommendations

Pediatricians play a role in facilitating parents' connections with high quality, research-informed online parenting information and parent training programs. This need is accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic, but will also persist after the pandemic. We know that pediatricians are generally open to playing this role. For instance, in a survey of 60 pediatricians, more than 90% of pediatricians reported openness to recommending a research-based parent education website to parents.⁷

During the COVID-19 pandemic, and beyond, pediatricians can work toward adopting the following practices to make high quality parent training accessible. **First**, pediatricians should familiarize themselves with high-quality technology-based resources for parent education (i.e., see examples in Table 1). Given the number of families that rely on mobile technology, ensuring that these resources are Smartphone compatible is an important consideration (i.e., that a personal computer is not needed). In addition to internet resources, SMS message programs, in which information is sent through brief text messages, may also be of benefit (see Table 1). **Second**, pediatricians should make it easy for parents to access this information and keep in mind that not all parents will ask about parenting challenging during office/telehealth visits (consider stigma noted by McGoron and Ondersma²). This may be accomplished by putting an online resource list in multiple places such as on the practice's website, in patient portals, through social media, and putting physical resource lists in multiple places in office. As new evidence-based parent training programs become available, pediatricians should incorporate referral to these programs just as they would refer to face-to-face services. **Third**, consider

incorporating screening practices, either remotely or at in-person visits, to detect challenges, such as child disruptive behavior, that may suggest parents could benefit from parent training. Positive screening would signal the need to be proactive in directing parents to internet-based parent training.

Closing Thoughts

In closing, the internet is an imperfect but important tool for parent training. During COVID-19, parents are in need of accessible information. A benefit of internet-based information is that parents can use it at any time throughout the day; this is critical during a time when parents are experiencing unpredicted stress and demands on their time. While we do not know how long social distancing measures will need to be in place due to COVID-19, we do know that the need for accessible, research-informed parenting guidance will persist. Both technology and pediatrics plays a role in answering this need.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Drs. Jennifer Gomez and Steven Ondersma for conversations that helped shape the ideas shared here.

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Table 1

Brief suggestions for research-informed, technology-based resources for parents

Internet-based resources:	
The AAP Parenting Website	Parenting tips and educational about child development organized by child age. https://www.healthychildren.org
CDC Essentials for Parenting Toddlers and Preschoolers	Through text and videos, teaches parents skills associated with reducing challenging behavior. Strategies parents can learn including communicating, giving directions, using consequences, and time-out. Printable resources such as a daily routine and chore chart. Activities to test parenting skills. https://www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials/index.html
PBS Kids for Parents	Educational articles for parents focused on children's optimal development and timely issues (e.g., COVID-19). Information about child development organized by age. Ideas for educational activities, such as recipes. Connect to high-quality educational shows and apps. https://www.pbs.org/parents
Available internet-based parent training programs:	
*Note: There are many internet-based parent training programs that are currently in development	
Triple P (Positive Parenting Program) Online	For a nominal fee, teaches parents evidence-based parenting strategies, such as time-out. \$79.95 for one year access (for parents in the U.S.A.); parents go through 8 interactive modules. https://www.triplep-parenting.com/us/triple-p/
Text message programs	
Text 4 Baby	Free program for pregnant mothers and parents of infants (up until their child's first birthday). Receive 3 texts per week with topics such as sleep, nutrition, car seat safety, doctor visit reminders. https://www.text4baby.org/
Bright by Text	Free program that provides tips and information for parents and expectant parents. Links to additional online resources, including videos. Child development information plus information about challenging child behavior. Parents receive 2-5 text messages per week. https://www.brightbytext.org/Families