

Insightful Research Discussed during UPF's UN Global Day of Parents Webinar

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UPF International - Universal Peace Federation took the opportunity during the UN Global Day of Parents to discuss the unique importance of parents and their critical role in raising children well adapted to contribute to society. Experts presented insightful research showing that enhancing the parent-to-parent relationship substantially improves their parenting effectiveness and children's wellbeing. The webinar took place on Thursday, June 2, 2022 and was titled, "Honoring Mothers' and Fathers' Hard and Gratifying Journey."

Dr. Taj Hamad, vice president of Universal Peace Federation, presented a history of the UN resolution establishing the Global Day of Parents, adding that a few countries celebrate Parents' Day nationally, including South Korea, the U.S. and India. He underlined the importance of honoring parents by quoting former U.S. Senator Jim DeMint, "One of the greatest titles in the world is parent, and one of the biggest blessings in the world is to have parents to call mom and dad."

The moderator, Lynn Walsh, UPF's director of the Office of the Family, commented that mothers' and fathers' parenting impacts every human being and, in so doing, all future citizens, and yet their role is not recognized or honored at the level it should be. Furthermore, even though the UN founding document defined the family as the "natural and fundamental group unit of society," the family (and parents) are rarely mentioned and largely ignored in UN deliberations and most national policies.

The main speakers, Professors Philip Cowan and Carolyn Pape Cowan, both from the University of California, Berkeley, Department of Psychology, have administered three longitudinal studies producing excellent information about parent effectiveness and the impact of parenting on their children's development. Dr. Carolyn Pape Cowan asserted that thousands of studies from many countries have found that when parents are nurturant and able to set limits, children benefit, having positive cognitive development and academic achievement, better social relationships with peers and later in adult life, and less anxiety, depression, anger, aggression and mental illness. She pointed out that many other influences either boost or hinder a parent's capacities, such as cultural beliefs and practices, political stability, war or conflict, poverty, and neighborhood environment as well as government services and policies. Clearly, parents' responsibilities become much more difficult depending on these circumstances and the outcome of children's development is not "all the parents' fault." Nevertheless, parents play an irreplaceable essential role. She also noted the "two-way street" of ineffective parenting and dysfunctional families leads to disorganized communities, increased crime, mental health problems and poverty which intensify and multiply demands on governmental resources and capacities.

Dr. Carolyn Pape Cowan reminded us that starting from the life changes an infant brings, parenting is simply a very difficult and at times an overwhelming task. All couples, not just low-income couples, are stressed and at risk with the demands of children. Stress and anxiety of parents have a cyclical impact by decreasing their ability to nurture themselves or each other, which leads to decreasing their capacities to care for and nurture their children, which in turn increases the stress on the parents.

Dr. Philip Cowan then described the research the Cowans have done on interventions designed to support parents. He noted that with COVID, unemployment, domestic violence, and divorce as well as war and migration, the urgency to help parents around the world is considerable. Over the years, parenting education fortunately emerged to help parents; however, very often fathers were not involved. Recently, more effort to engage fathers in parenting education has shown a positive impact on the well-being of the mother, child and father. However, the Cowans observed that rarely was an effort made to address the relationship between the mother and father itself. Studies have shown that unresolved conflict and unhappiness between the parents leads to children's aggression, hyperactivity, depression, social withdrawal and poor school performance. How can we help parents while ignoring strain with their relationship? This unresolved problem was an impetus for the Cowans' work.

Implementing the family-systems model, the Cowans developed an educational intervention that addressed all interrelated aspects of the family: the parents as individuals, the parent-child relationship, the impact of the family of origin, unique stressors and supports of each family, and the couples' relationship. The Cowans' approach included a couples group held for 16 to 24 weeks with both the mother and father participating. The evaluation of these couples-focused parenting groups compared to the parent-focused parenting group showed that both decreased harsh or authoritarian parenting, decreased the children's depression, and increased the child's positive adaptation. However, only the couple-focused group decreased the couple conflict and volatility. With other studies, it was shown that the couple satisfaction declined and children's behavioral problems increased after participation in parent-only-focused groups. The father-only groups increased fathers' involvement, and children's behavior remained the same; however, the couple satisfaction decreased. A significant and hoped-for result came from the Cowans' integrated couple-focused parenting groups, where the children's behavior remained stable, parent stress was reduced and couple satisfaction remained stable or couple conflict was reduced. A different study in England revealed that the integrated couple-focused parenting approach reduced parents' stress, couple conflict, violent problem solving, children's overall emotional and behavioral problems and increased the couples' satisfaction with each other.

The Cowans summarized that they are quite encouraged that the family-systems approach to parenting has shown consistent positive results for parent's effectiveness, children's well-being and the couples' happiness. They noted that, regrettably, these types of interventions are labor-intensive and require well-trained facilitators. They hope this can be remedied with expanded training. The Cowans pointed out, however, that without attending their programs parents can still improve their parental effectiveness and parental and couple satisfaction by taking time to regularly "check-in" with each other's concerns while avoiding complaint, negotiating each other's family responsibilities to find a workable balance, and discussing family-of-origin issues - what is desirable or what not to repeat. Also, outside help can be a great resource for more challenging times.

It was heartening to hear the Cowans' insight about bolstering parenting abilities and children's well-being through a family-systems approach. It was reassuring that not only can we all become more competent and collaborative as mothers and fathers, but we can be happier together. They shared with us that besides all of the social science research, much of their learning took place in their own marital and parenting experience raising together three children and now grandchildren. So, not only was the science encouraging but so were the lessons learned from the Cowans' own journey.