

# MAXIMIZING ACCESS AND IMPACT:

## Strategies for Parenting and 2Gen Programs

A Research-to-Practice Brief for the Aspen Institute Ascend Network  
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### THE ISSUE: INEQUALITY OF ACCESS AND IMPACT

Research indicates that parenting programs create positive impacts for an array of parent and child outcomes that are substantial, cost-effective, and last beyond the duration of the program.

However, programs tend to be much less successful at enrolling, retaining, and engaging:

- Parents who are racial/ethnic minorities or immigrants
- Parents who are less educated or have lower incomes
- Parents who are experiencing depression or social isolation
- Parents who face high levels of stress or have children with more behavioral problems/clinical diagnoses

Furthermore, meta-analyses have shown that these programs have the **smallest impacts** for families from low-income, high-needs communities.

### MOVING FORWARD: USING RESEARCH TO INFORM THE PATH TO EQUITY

Low-income families face a disproportionately high number of barriers that may prevent or limit them from accessing parent and 2Gen programs, as well as factors that either increase the perceived/actual costs of participation or reduce the perceived/actual benefits. To mitigate these disparities, it is essential for those involved in program design and implementation to be aware of what these barriers and factors are, and what research suggests are promising strategies for program design, recruitment, and implementation that can reduce barriers and costs while increasing benefits. This research-to-practice brief contains a brief summary of research on the barriers to access and participation, and a set of promising strategies for parenting and 2Gen programs. To maximize access and impact, program developers should use as many strategies as are feasible and relevant to the local context. Details about each strategy and a complete list of references can be found in the accompanying report:

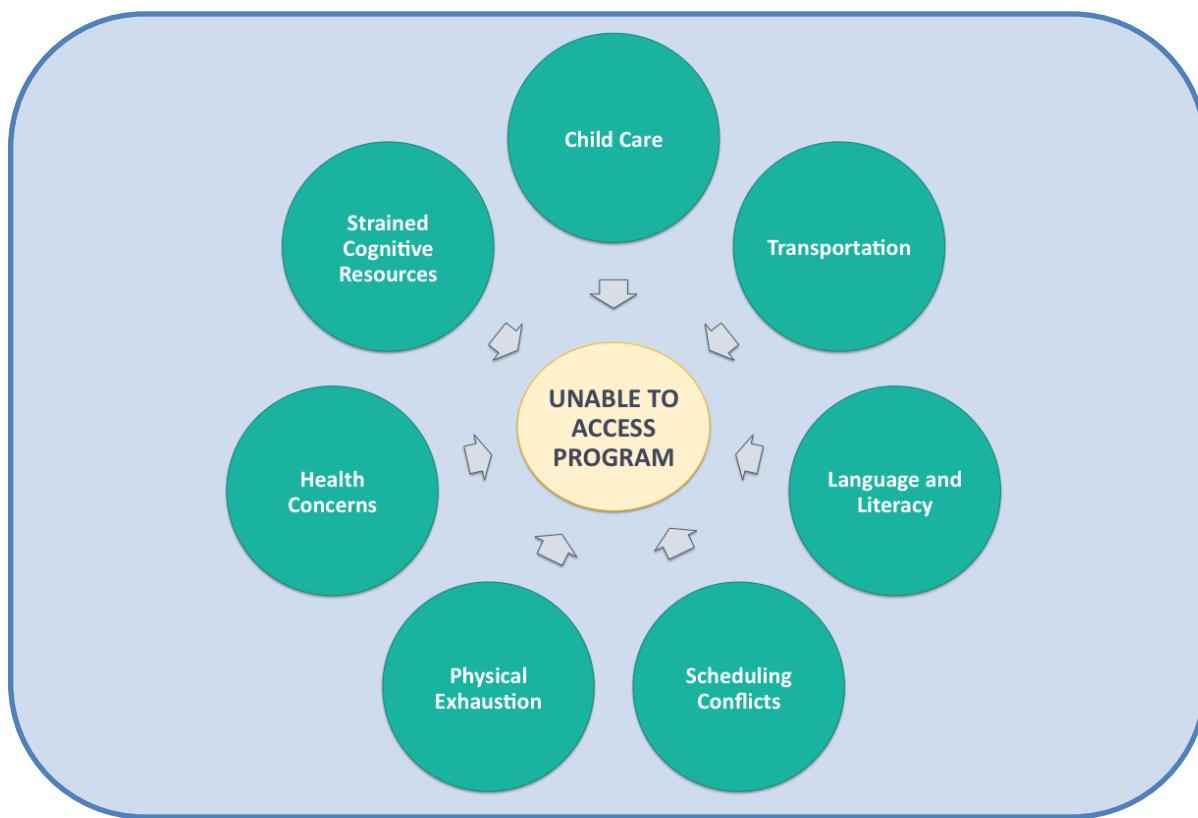
"Maximizing Access and Impact: A Review of Research: Strategies for the Design, Recruitment, and Implementation of Parenting and 2Gen Programs." By Nina Sokolovic, Rebecca Bailey and Stephanie M. Jones, Harvard University. Published by the Aspen Institute Ascend Network, March 2017.

# What accounts for the differential impact of parenting programs among low-income communities?

## 1. BARRIERS TO ACCESS

A number of life circumstances can create barriers that prevent or limit parents from accessing high-quality programs. Key factors identified in a comprehensive literature review include:

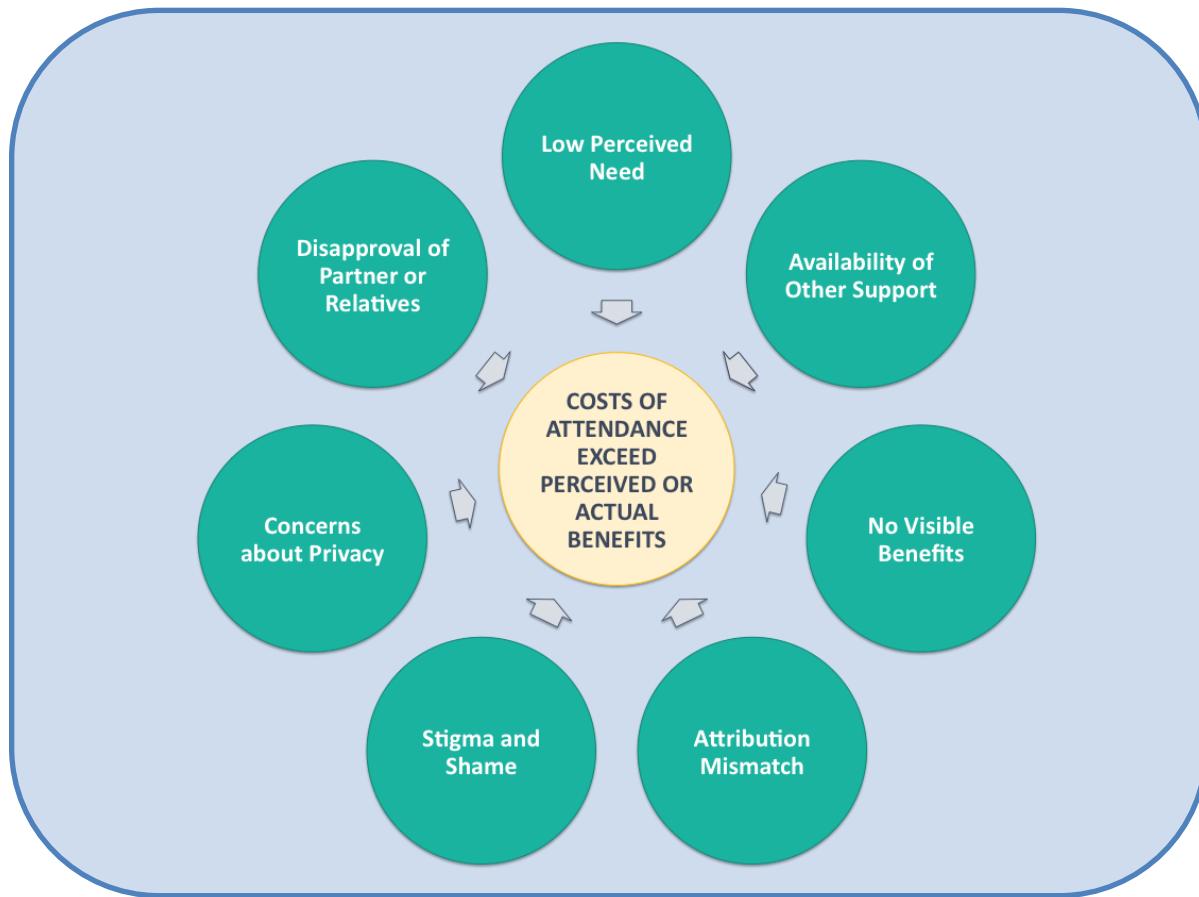
- **Child Care:** parents may be unable to secure childcare for the duration of the program because it is cost-prohibitive, not readily available, or requires excess advanced planning
- **Transportation:** parents who do not have access to a vehicle may be unable to access or afford public transportation, or available options may be highly inconvenient
- **Language & Literacy:** parents for whom English is not their first-language or who are not fully literate may be unable to understand recruitment or program materials
- **Scheduling Conflicts:** parents who work (multiple) part-time jobs or jobs with shift-work may have schedules that occasionally or always conflict with program times; other family obligations including children's activities may overlap with program times
- **Physical Exhaustion:** excessive work or family obligations can result in sleep-deprivation or physical exhaustion making reliable attendance difficult or impossible
- **Health Concerns:** parents may suffer from depression, addiction or other mental health problems, a chronic or acute physical illness, or may be obligated to take care of an ill child or elderly family member making reliable attendance difficult or impossible
- **Strained Cognitive Resources:** parents dealing with high levels of stress must prioritize their available cognitive resources to ensure their families' basic needs are met



## 2. BARRIERS TO ATTENDANCE – AFFECTING ALL FAMILIES

Research also indicates that a number of programmatic, community/social-cultural, and individual or family factors may make the costs of program participation exceed the benefits, either perceived or actual. Key factors which may be reasons NOT to participate include:

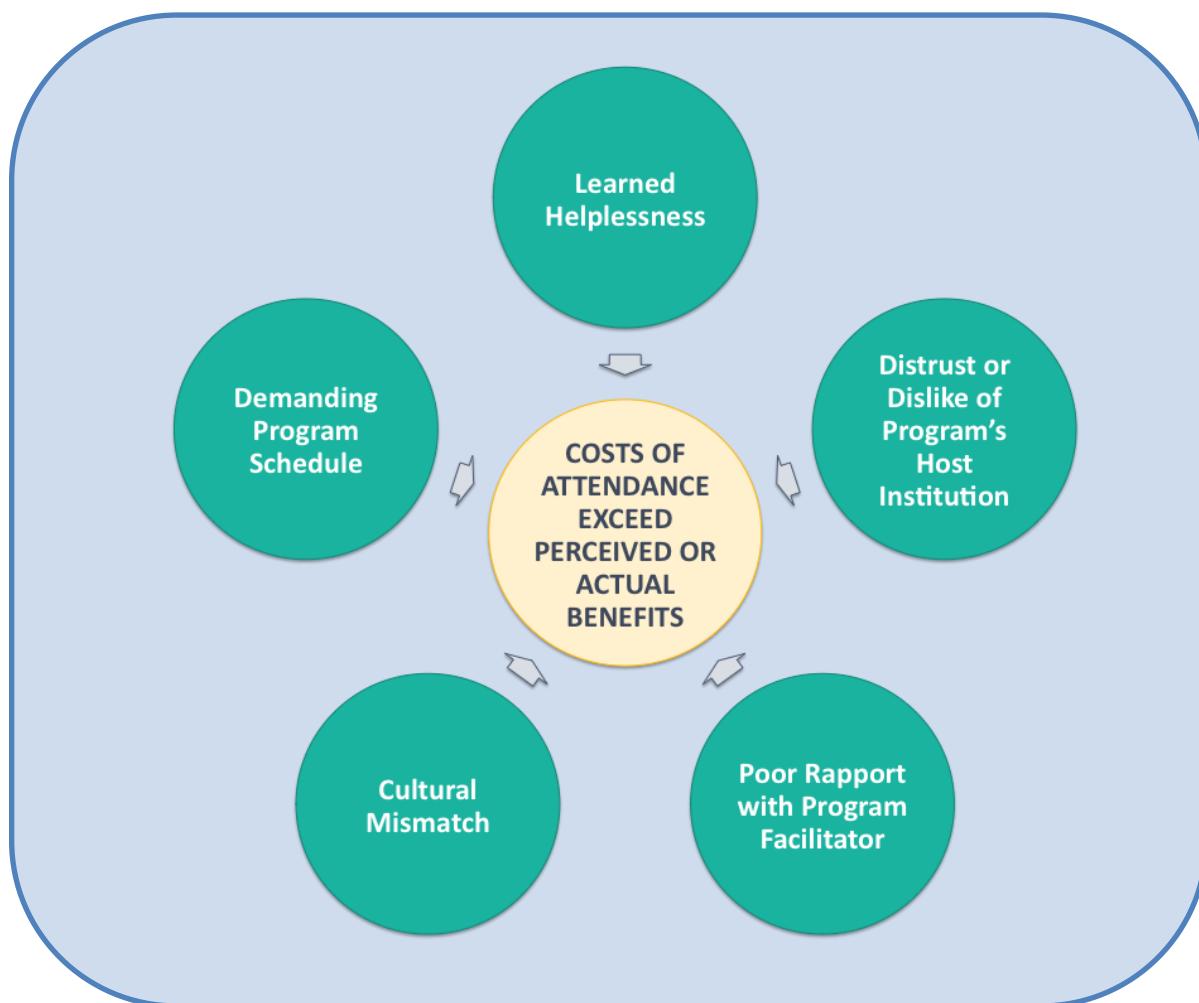
- **Low Perceived Need:** child is not showing any difficulty behaviors or problem behaviors at that moment; parents are highly confident in their ability to handle any parenting challenges
- **Availability of Other Support:** parents have other social support and information networks to rely on
- **No Visible Benefits:** parents fail to see immediate changes in the issues they are struggling with and thus lose confidence in the effectiveness of the program
- **Attribution Mismatch:** parents believe that parenting challenges can only be solved through programs that address children's behavior and not parenting practices
- **Stigma and Shame:** parents equate seeking assistance or support from a parenting program with admitting to others to being a "bad" or "inadequate" parent
- **Concerns about Privacy:** parents do not want to discuss personal family affairs with other parents from their community
- **Disapproval of Partner or Relatives:** a partner or other family members discourage program attendance for various reasons



### 3. BARRIERS TO ATTENDANCE – AFFECTING LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Furthermore, certain programmatic, community/social-cultural, and individual or family factors that decrease likelihood of program participation may *disproportionally* affect low-income, minority and other high-needs families. These are particularly important to consider in the design and implementation of programs intended to benefit these populations. Key factors identified in research include:

- **Demanding Schedule:** program is too long, intensive, or has an inflexible schedule
- **Learned Helplessness:** parents believe that no program can mitigate the challenges they face as parents due to the extent of their concerns, the persistence of their struggles and/or previous unsuccessful attempts to address these challenges
- **Cultural Mismatch:** program content does not align with parents' cultural values
- **Distrust or Dislike of Program's Host Institution:** parents have an experience of being marginalized or disappointed by the services, programs or staff located in the institution that is hosting the program (e.g. school, community center, clinic)
- **Poor Rapport with Program Facilitator:** program facilitator is not relatable, personable, or empathetic and is unable to build a good rapport with parents



## What strategies may improve access and impact of parenting programs among low-income communities?

Based on a comprehensive review of research, we have identified a number of promising strategies that program developers, service providers, and other stakeholders may use to inform the design, recruitment, or implementation of parenting and 2Gen programs. These strategies were identified in a literature review of 60+ studies of parenting programs, primarily focusing on programs designed to serve low-income and at-risk families. While the strategies listed here are not exhaustive, they are intended to address multiple barriers to access and multiple factors that may impact program participation, retention, and impact.

The strategies included below have varying degrees of relevance to different communities, contexts, and programmatic objectives; therefore we have organized them thematically in terms of goals or the needs/barriers addressed. Some strategies are likely to be applicable universally (across all populations) while others are more likely to be relevant only in specific contexts or to certain individuals/families. Some strategies may be particularly valuable for increasing the participation of fathers.

The strategies have varying levels of evidence to support their use: some are supported by evidence from a randomized control trial (the most rigorous criteria available), some are supported by quantitative evidence in the form of documented positive associations between strategy use and higher program enrollment/attendance/engagement/completion, and some are supported by qualitative evidence in the form of positive feedback from parents endorsing the value of the strategy. Some strategies reflect researchers' or program staff/facilitators' recommendations, based on their observations or experiences implementing and evaluating parenting programs.

At present, the strategies with the strongest evidence for their effectiveness are those that address the greatest number of barriers, reduce the greatest number of costs, and/or enhance the greatest number of benefits. These include: (1) acknowledging the cultural context and diversity of communities (e.g. cultural competence training for all staff, cultural adaptations of program content); (2) asking parents about their needs, desires, and barriers (e.g. preliminary focus groups, motivational interviewing); or (3) focusing on interpersonal relationships (e.g. in-person recruitment, strong interpersonal skills of recruiters and facilitators, home-visits and family engagement).

For more information about the level of evidence and applicability of each strategy, or about the methodology used to compile this information, see Appendices A-B of the accompanying report.

*NOTE: See also the Checklist Tool created for program staff, which is drawn from the list of promising strategies summarized here.*

## PROMISING STRATEGIES FOR PROGRAM DESIGN

To increase program relevance and reduce logistical barriers to access or participation:

- ❖ Conduct Community-Based Preliminary Research (Focus Groups or Interviews) in order to answer the following questions:
  - What are the common and urgent needs of parents in the community?
  - What topics/content are parents most interested in or curious about?
  - What is the most convenient program time given typical work/activity/school schedules in the community?
  - What is the most convenient program location? What are parents' perceptions of the location/host institutions and its other programs/members/staff?
  - What are the prevalent languages and literacy levels in the community?
  - Are there any examples from the community that can be incorporated into program content or practice scenarios?
  - Who are the trusted individuals and institutions in the community and can they endorse the program or be involved in some capacity?

To increase alignment of program content and structure with parent needs and desires:

- ❖ Involve parents directly in program design wherever possible
- ❖ Ensure program content acknowledges the diversity of cultural values and traditions in the community
- ❖ Adapt program to address any topics that are particularly salient in the community (e.g. racial socialization)
- ❖ Design the program such that lessons on unobjectionable parenting practices likely to create the fastest visible changes in parent stress or child behavior come first in the sequence
- ❖ If parents would appreciate time for socialization and the opportunity to share experiences, build time into program sessions to build group cohesion and social support networks
- ❖ Alternatively, if concerns about privacy are prevalent, consider creating an online or self-administered format of the program
- ❖ Ensure the balance of group discussion vs. personal written activities in the program suits parents' literacy levels and concerns about privacy

To increase the effectiveness of program staff:

- ❖ Hire facilitators that represent a cultural match with the community, who parents likely to trust and relate to
- ❖ Make superior interpersonal skills a top hiring criterion for program facilitators
- ❖ Have all staff to complete cultural competence training
- ❖ Hire bilingual recruitment staff and facilitators, if necessary

## PROMISING STRATEGIES FOR PROGRAM RECRUITMENT

### To increase perceived need/relevance:

- ❖ Educate parents about the prevalence of risk factors for child development in the community and the prevalence of negative outcomes the parenting program seeks to prevent
- ❖ Include evidence of the program's effectiveness in recruitment materials
- ❖ Focus on advertising content of the program that resonates with common needs and values across diverse populations in the community
- ❖ Highlight the cultural relevance of the program (if applicable)
- ❖ For fathers, advertise the importance and value of paternal participation

### To reduce stigma:

- ❖ Advertise program goals in a positive frame rather than using deficit-based language (e.g. "build skills" vs. "fix problems")
- ❖ Advertise testimonials from other parents
- ❖ Use mass media and social media to demystify and normalize the program
- ❖ Advertise to fathers directly, using adapted materials

### To increase parent receptivity:

- ❖ Target younger, less experienced parents (especially prenatally)
- ❖ Use face-to-face recruitment as opposed to mailings
- ❖ Use highly personable and culturally competent recruitment staff from the local community
- ❖ Have individuals in the community who parents are familiar with and trust (e.g. teachers, principals, pastors) make the initial recruitment contact with parents

### To reduce potential barriers to and costs of attendance:

- ❖ Use motivational interviewing during recruitment to discuss anticipated positive impacts of the program, self-motivating statements about attendance and adherence, and barriers including scheduling availability and anticipated obstacles
- ❖ Discuss parent expectations and any previous experiences they have had with other similar programs
- ❖ Involve program facilitators in recruitment so that they build familiarity and rapport with participants before the program begins; when possible, have the facilitator conduct home visits
- ❖ Identify potential sources of support or conflict parents among parents' family members
- ❖ Determine the level of disorder and distress in parents' lives; refer parents to other services to help them address other pressing concerns in their lives, as necessary
- ❖ Minimize the time between recruitment and program launch

## PROMISING STRATEGIES FOR PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

### To reduce barriers:

- ❖ Provide free transportation or reimbursements for transportation (e.g. taxi vouchers)
- ❖ Offer concurrent free childcare that either makes children want to return and encourage their parent to do so OR that builds skills which reinforce goals of the parent program; if it is not possible to provide childcare, offer reimbursements
- ❖ Provide meals or refreshments for parents; use meal time for socialization
- ❖ Compensate parents with financial incentives or tangible goods

### To make a positive first impression, at the first session:

- ❖ Clarify program goals, content and expected results to address potential misconceptions and discrepancies in parent expectations
- ❖ Have parents share their cultural traditions and experiences from their own childhood and family-of-origin

### To motivate continued attendance:

- ❖ Maximize scheduling flexibility and allow parents to return after an absence, to the extent possible and without sacrificing the parent group atmosphere
- ❖ Follow-up with parents who miss sessions so that they are motivated to return and can do so without feeling behind; if possible, offer make-up sessions or video recordings
- ❖ Provide phone-call and/or SMS reminders between and immediately before sessions
- ❖ Advertise the content of future sessions and remind parents of the long-term benefits of participation at each session

### To maintain continued buy-in:

- ❖ Have parents come up with personalized implementation plans, which include tasks for non-attending family members to build support
- ❖ Give facilitators the flexibility to adapt content based on parent needs/requests
- ❖ Equip facilitators to address other parent needs, answer other parenting questions, and provide referrals as needed
- ❖ Provide strong training, compensation, and support for facilitators, especially with the goal to minimize facilitator turnover
- ❖ Solicit parent feedback, suggestions, and requests frequently

## CONCLUSION

This brief provides an overview of current explanations for the low enrollment, attendance, and engagement rates that often limit the impact of parenting and 2Gen programs; as well as a comprehensive list of promising strategies that can be used to enhance these rates. To the extent possible, these strategies can be used to enhance the match between a program and the community in which it is situated. By employing relevant strategies, programs are likely to maximize access and impact for the parents and families they intend to serve.