



WHAT IS PARENTAL EDUCATION?

A Guide to Encouraging Appreciative Parenting



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Dear Readers,



In a constantly changing world where children and families face numerous challenges, parental education becomes an essential pillar for creating a safe, balanced, and supportive environment. The guide *What is Parental Education? A Guide to Encouraging Appreciative Parenting* has been developed as a valuable tool for teachers and professionals working with children and parents, offering practical and theoretical resources to support families in the educational process.

This material is rooted in the experiences gained through the Appreciative Parenting Program and the organization of parental education courses conducted in participating schools. The guide not only underscores the importance of parental education but also provides concrete methods for developing and implementing such courses in schools, creating a bridge between communities, educators, and parents.

Clearly and comprehensively structured, the guide introduces the concept of appreciative parenting and outlines how this program can be applied in various contexts. From training parental educators to monitoring and evaluating the program's outcomes, the guide succinctly covers the key aspects needed to create a real and positive impact.

It is true that the term parental education can sometimes provoke hesitation, being perceived as intrusive or as an implicit critique of parents' abilities. However, removing the concept of education from this phrase is not a viable solution, as parental education does not signify a process of correction or imposition but rather an opportunity for support, guidance, development, and learning for parents. To mitigate this apprehension, it is essential to clarify the true meaning of parental education. It does not imply that parents are inadequate or need to be "taught how to parent." Instead, it represents: A continuous learning process that enriches knowledge and offers new perspectives on parent-child relationships; Support in navigating the challenges of a constantly evolving world, where modern parenting grows increasingly complex; A safe space for reflection and sharing experiences, free of judgment or pressure, aimed at fostering connection and trust.

Primarily intended for professionals, this guide aims to serve as both a source of inspiration and a practical resource for all those who contribute to the development of harmonious relationships between children, parents, and schools. We are confident that embracing the principles of appreciative parental education not only strengthens family bonds but also transforms schools and communities into more welcoming and inclusive spaces.

With gratitude for the dedication of everyone involved in this transformative process,

Prof. Dr. Ștefan Marian COJOCARU

President, HoltIS Association

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WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guide is intended for teachers and professionals who interact with children and their parents.

The guide promotes the importance of parent education and offers ways to develop parent education courses in schools.





INTRODUCTION TO PARENT EDUCATION



Being a parent is one of the most complex, challenging yet rewarding experiences that life has to offer. Raising a child into a healthy and well-balanced adult who can take their place in the next generation is a great responsibility. The early years, when the child discovers, understands and learns the principles and rules of the world in which they live, especially with the help of their family, are extremely important. That is why parents need to use positive child-rearing methods. It is much easier to prevent negative patterns so that the child doesn't follow them later in life than to change them when they have already set in.

Parent education programmes have been developed in response to the current social background, which requires new parenting practices to help parents raise children who can adapt to today's social context but are also flexible enough to adapt to future contexts. Looking at the current background, we can say that – due to the rapid pace of social changes, the shift in the family status and parental anxiety – parents feel they need professional support to learn new parenting practices. Such learning is necessary, as parenting is considered the most influential factor on children's outcomes.

The risks that derive from family's inability to keep up with the pace of social change can have a negative impact on child development. As the most immediate social context, family influences the way in which the child develops and, therefore, any family dysfunctions lead to child development dysfunctions. Dysfunctions may arise when the family has to deal with chronic adversities (for example: long-term unemployment, poverty, single parenting, chronic illness, etc.) or as a result of inadequate interaction among family members (poor communication, inappropriate emotional management, lack of positive discipline methods, etc.).

The Parent Education Programme developed by HoltIS is designed as a prevention/intervention tool used precisely to help parents develop healthy parenting practices, regardless of whether they have to deal with the adversities of life or not.

The Appreciative Parenting Programme is a form of systematic and consistent group intervention that offers parents positive ways to interact, contexts for creating and reinforcing positive experiences with children, a setting that fosters and stimulates new attitudes and behaviour, as well as the possibility to learn more about child-rearing, childcare and child development.



DESCRIPTION OF THE APPRECIATIVE PARENTING PROGRAMME

The Appreciative Parenting Programme implemented by HoltIS is aimed for parents who want to improve both their parenting skills and the relationship with their children. The Programme is based on a US model that Holt Romania imported in 1999 and adapted to Romanian realities. Its main focus is on meetings with parents in a supportive setting.

The same group of parents attends eight-ten meetings of approximately two and a half hours each, where they discuss topics of interest for each parent. The course is spread over eight-ten weeks (one meeting per week) and may be extended to include additional sessions, which tackle other topics of interest for the group, as agreed by all the participants. Depending on the topic discussed, professionals from different fields, such as doctors, lawyers, psychologists, priests, may be invited to these additional meetings to provide more detailed answers to participants' questions. The group is facilitated by the parent educator, who will constantly seek to create and maintain a pleasant atmosphere of personal safety and protection, which will also encourage participating parents to build a support network.

APPRECIATIVE PARENTING COURSE TOPICS

Based on the profiles of the parents attending Appreciative Parenting classes, the Programme has documented and carried out several sessions on specific topics.

Course topics are chosen based on the group of parents and their children's ages. There is a set of core topics, which are common to all the categories of parents, as it follows:

- S01 How to Be a Wise Parent
- S02 How We Can Stay Relaxed in Stressful Contexts
- S03 How to Communicate Effectively with Your Child
- S04 How to Be a Reliable Partner in Your Relationship with Your Child
- S05 How to Positively Approach Your Child's Behaviors
- S06 How to Prevent Abuse and Its Effects on the Child
- S99 What Do We Do Next?

Additional topics from the optional list can be added to these:

- S07 How to Accompany Your Child on Their Developmental Path



- S08 Health Education
- S09 Peer Groups and Free Time in Adolescents
- S10 Self-Control and Avoiding the Use of Harmful Substances
- S11 How to Play with Our Child
- S12 Non-Cognitive Skills
- S13 Bullying and Cyberbullying
- S14 The Importance of Supporting Children in the Transition from Middle School to High School
- S15 Immunity and Vaccination: Useful Information for Parents
- S16 How Can We Understand Gender Equality?
- S17 How to Stimulate Learning Through Play
- S18 How to Support Your Child in Overcoming Traumatic States

Every curriculum is divided into two parts: the first part focuses on the individual, while the second part is centred on the individual in their role as a parent.

PARENT GROUP SIZE

The average group size for the How to become better parents course is 10 to 20 parents. It is recommended to have groups of 10 to 15 people so that parents can get enough opportunities to actively participate. Groups of less than eight people are not recommended, as common absences due to sickness and other factors may affect the size and dynamics of the group.

COURSE SETTING

The ideal setting is an informal, pleasant, and comfortable one. The Appreciative Parenting Programme classes may be held in resource centres, schools, community halls, rented rooms; in any of these venues, it is important to create an atmosphere where people feel safe and comfortable in each other's presence.

Parents usually sit in a semicircle so that everyone can see both the image projected on the screen and each member of the group. Parents sit on chairs and the parent educator has to arrange the furniture in a way that will induce a positive mood.

One of the benefits of these classes is that parents get special time for reflection, discussion and support. During each session, parents appreciate the fact that they get to have some "grown-up time" and to reflect.



Serving refreshments to the group can also contribute to a pleasant and comfortable environment. It has been shown that chatting over 'cake and coffee' helps lighten the atmosphere and create a warmer ambiance that encourages participants to share their personal experiences.

TIME

The time of day when the course is held is important. Meeting hours are agreed with all the parents, based on everyone's possibility to attend. A course of two to two and a half hours, including a snack break, can work very well.

PROCESSING

Each course module is structured around the key concept(s) and objectives. The agenda suggests an order for presenting the material. This can be easily individualised to meet the needs of each group. In each session, the material is presented using a variety of learning modes (short presentations made by the parent educator, short videos, hands-on activities in large and small groups, discussion topics, interactive dialogue, and home assignments). These are designed to appeal to parents with different learning styles (auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic). Most sessions include summaries of previous meetings and home assignments. They give participants a chance to talk about their achievements and experiences while recapping the key points. It also allows the parent educator to get important feedback.

REPETITION

During each session, the material is deliberately repeated in a variety of forms as a working tool. Repetition helps normalise and reinforce concepts and information. Parents are presented with information and choices regarding the kind of parent they want to be and ways to change attitudes and behaviours. The goal is to help parents understand these concepts, start using them in their everyday lives and feel good about themselves.

GROUP TIME, GOOD NEWS/BAD NEWS

Throughout the course, parents are invited and encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings. An important part of each session is the special time devoted to parents for sharing their good news/bad news (and anything else that works for your group, like something they did for themselves that week or something they did with their child). This time is precious for many reasons:



- It allows parents to take some “special time” for themselves. This is a time when they can speak openly and get support from the other participants, knowing they will not be criticised or judged.
- It is an opportunity to create strong bonds between group members, which helps parents build a support network. By sharing what works and what doesn’t work in their lives, parents realise how much they have in common and start to encourage, understand and support each other.
- It provides the parent educator with instant and important information about what is going on in the lives of the participants and about their problems and concerns. Sometimes, they can choose to focus on these issues instead of presenting the material prepared for that course.

CONTACT BETWEEN SESSIONS

It is useful to informally contact parents by phone between sessions. This provides a good opportunity to follow up on any concerns that parents expressed during class or in private. It is also an opportunity to find out parents’ interests or thoughts as feedback, which is helpful for planning future classes. As parents are contacted individually between meetings, it is important for the parent educator to write down any specific issues they raise, any references they make, or materials they promise to bring for them.

MATERIALS DEVELOPED AND USED

Guides for parents:

- Parent Guide.
- How to stimulate learning through play. Guide for parents.
- Healing traumas. Guide for parents.

Handbooks for parent educators

- S01 How to Be a Wise Parent
- S02 How We Can Stay Relaxed in Stressful Contexts
- S03 How to Communicate Effectively with Your Child
- S04 How to Be a Reliable Partner in Your Relationship with Your Child
- S05 How to Positively Approach Your Child's Behaviours



- S06 How to Prevent Abuse and Its Effects on the Child
- S07 How to Accompany Your Child on Their Developmental Path
- S08 Health Education
- S09 Peer Groups and Free Time in Adolescents
- S10 Self-Control and Avoiding the Use of Harmful Substances
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- S16 How Can We Understand Gender Equality?
- S17 How to Stimulate Learning Through Play
- S18 How to Support Your Child in Overcoming Traumatic States
- S99 What Do We Do Next?

During the theoretical training, each participant receives the "Parental Educator's kit", which contains:

- A folder.
- Handbooks for parent educators.
- Guides for parents.

During the first session, each parent gets the "Parent's Kit", which contains:

- A folder.
- Guides for parents.
- A pen.
- A badge.

THE STAFF

The course is delivered by a HoltIS-accredited parent educator – a professional trained in group dynamics who holds communication skills, knowledge of optimal child development, and counselling skills. The HoltIS parent educator may be supported by another well-trained assistant parent educator who can take over some of the responsibilities and group activities. This type of co-facilitation allows parents to get individual attention and strengthens group dynamics. It also provides a good opportunity for HoltIS parent educators to solve problems together as well as to give and receive feedback.



Parent educators' roles are to:

- Create a supportive, warm, safe, and tolerant environment for programme participants.
- Help parents take responsibility for their learning and change.
- Help parents find information as well as identify and make efficient use of their own resources.
- Manage and facilitate discussions during the meetings, making sure they don't go off topic.
- Encourage parents to open up and share their experiences.
- Respect people with different lifestyles, values, philosophies, and cultures.
- Make sure the parent group works as a support group.
- Feel the dynamic of the group and act accordingly.

The parent education programme that has been implemented, attuned, and adapted to different categories of parents is inspired by the latest theories in adult education (social constructionism, the appreciative approach etc.) and is in line with the value system promoted by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The whole programme rests upon the theory that parents are the first role models from which children learn through imitation. That is why, before intervening on the child's behaviour, the parent needs to be aware of their own behaviour and find the best ways to adjust it and make it worthy of being imitated by the child.

This programme can refer parents to other services they would not normally seek. Parents who are very stressed accept more willingly other types of support for themselves and their families when the parenting course participants establish a trusting relationship. They will share their experiences with the group more easily and be more open to use other resources. Too often, families seek the help they need only after patterns that may be seriously destructive have set in. At that point, interventions are much less effective and, sometimes, too late.

The Appreciative Parenting Programme is thought out as a technique for developing and adjusting parenting styles in an extremely dynamic society. This programme is just a starting point – a place where parents can learn more about their parenting style and the options, they have for guiding their children and a place where they can gain more confidence in themselves as people and as parents.

We believe that, by giving parents the opportunity to provide and receive information about positive alternatives and to support each other, we can help them take action to improve the quality of life for themselves and their children. The programme focuses on parents' worth and strengths. The basic principles of the programme are centred on parent appreciation, respect and support.



TRAINING OF PARENT EDUCATORS

The Appreciative Parenting Programme was initially designed for parents in crisis, as this heightens the risk of abusive behaviour towards children. The programme later proved to be just as relevant to any family experiencing parental stress, including single parents, adoptive parents, families of children with special needs, foster carers, first-time parents, and parents under “normal” stress.

Then, following the research conducted by HoltIS with support from UNICEF in Romania, which confirmed that parents were more willing to attend the course if the parent educator was a community member they knew, the Parent Educator Training component was developed at community level.

So far, various professionals, like teachers from county school inspectorates, county educational resource and assistance centres and schools, school counsellors, school mediators, social workers, foster carers, and psychologists, have been trained as parent educators.

The parent educator training programme involves theoretical and practical training.

Theoretical training for accreditation as a parent educator takes 40 hours and it can take place through face-to-face meetings, online or hybrid. During their theoretical training, each participant will receive the parent educator’s kit.

Practical training for accreditation as a parent educator takes 40 hours (four hours/meeting *ten meetings/course) and requires each professional who has completed theoretical training to plan and hold ten meetings with parents.

After completing both training stages, each professional receives their two-year accreditation as a HoltIS Model Parent Educator. To be reaccredited, the parent educator must hold at least one parent education course per year, in accordance with HoltIS procedures.



PRINCIPLES OF THE APPRECIATIVE PARENTING PROGRAMME



The Programme promotes the concept of appreciative parenting, which is closely linked to that of *appreciative pedagogy* which was first introduced by L. Yballe and D. O'Connor to describe a type of pedagogy intended to produce a change in education, emphasising an approach that values and appreciates the human experience and its peak moments while projecting future actions that can maximise the human and creative potential.

The characteristics of this type of pedagogy, as outlined by the two authors (Yballe L.&O'Connor D., 2000) and adapted to parent education, are inspired by the principles of appreciative inquiry.

Focus on experience

The learning process starts from the way in which educators and parents experience life, themselves and the world, and parents are perceived as potential sources and creators of knowledge, based on their experiences in various fields.

Focus on achievements

Appreciative Parenting focuses on harnessing parents' moments of great success, pride and glory as the foundation and an inspiration for future success; when they are acknowledged, past achievements can reinforce and anticipate future achievements. Therefore, parenting group discussions focus on helping parents identify their parenting achievements as well as their own and their children's strengths and the way in which they have contributed to those achievements.



Exploring the link between positive vision and positive action

The role of parent education is to create a positive vision (about people, institutions, community, children, etc.), as this is a source of energy and a catalyst for positive action; a comprehensive education built on a positive vision stimulates creativity and transforms parents and their interaction with children. The more positive the questions we ask during the meetings, the faster and more successful the social change that we achieve. Thus, the family will move in the direction we focus on.

Building a partnership between the educator and the parents

This type of relationship fosters interaction, participation and a positive attitude towards the other parents participating in the group meetings and towards the parent educator, who is seen as a resource and a guide. It also boosts parents' confidence in their own experience when they see that the other group participants appreciate that experience.

The principle of parallel process in parent education

It is very important to stress the fact that parents should be encouraged to integrate the exercises and the positive attitude they pick up during the meetings in their behaviour towards children, partners or other people close to their children.



The constructionist principle in parent education

The family environment is constructed by its members based on their knowledge, beliefs and ideas. By applying this principle to parenting groups, we encourage parents to examine and explore their mental patterns regarding family. Therefore, exploring this perspective helps us understand that the ideas, beliefs and representations that group members have about their own families become real in this environment.

The principle of simultaneity

The questions we ask parents during parenting classes condition them to think in the terms used to phrase those questions; for example, if we ask parents about the problems they have with their partners or in the relationship with their children, we automatically make them think of and talk about those problems, even if they were not thinking about these things in the beginning; we make them think about problems, and group interaction reinforces these negative attitudes.

The anticipatory principle

Family members' images, ideas and hopes for the future guide their behaviour and actions that lead to that very future. Positive images of the future lead to positive action and negative images lead to negative action and behaviour.



The poetic principle

This means constantly constructing and reconstructing the family environment, just like a poem that can be interpreted and reinterpreted, adding new meanings every single time. In other words, family (and hence the parenting style) changes as family stories and interpretations change. This is why the language we use in our discourse is so important.

The principle of social projection

Family is guided by reversed determinism – that is, it does not focus on the relationship between cause and effect, but the other way around; thus, when parents set goals, they actually determine the causes that can produce the expected effects; if the parent wants to develop positive behaviour in the child, they will look for the causes that can produce those effects, involving the child in the construction and development of that vision.

The principle of participation

A successful vision can be built with the participation and involvement of all the parties. In other words, if that vision includes the child, the child has to participate in the process through consensual negotiation.



MONITORING OF THE APPRECIATIVE PARENTING PROGRAMME

The trained parent educators and the parenting courses they carry out are monitored through the online platform www.qie.ro.

In the theoretical training stage, an account is created and activated on the online platform for each parent educator. Logging in with this account allows parent educators to enter the following data on the platform when they carry out parenting courses:

- Session planning (a calendar is created, with a date for each of the eight-ten parenting sessions).
- Parents' identification details (full name, date of birth, contact details, socio-economic status, educational attainment etc.).
- Information about attendees' children (number of children, age).
- Parents' course attendance (the parent educator ticks the parents who attend each planned meeting).
- Parents' course evaluations.

Thus, the online platform www.qie.ro allows for the nationwide real-time monitoring of active parent educators, ongoing courses, participating parents, impacted children, and feedback on the courses.



IMPACT OF THE APPRECIATIVE PARENTING PROGRAMME

The study “Optimising strategies for recruiting parents and strengthening the parenting practices developed during parent education courses”, (Cojocaru &Cojocaru, 2011) conducted as part of the “Childhood and Parenthood Centre” project, implemented by Holt Romania – Iași Branch with support from UNICEF in Romania, highlights the following effects of the courses on participating parents:

- More balance between parental control and emotional support.
- More effective communication with the child thanks to parents’ improved listening skills and increased willingness to listen to their children.
- Increasing parents’ willingness to listen to children’s problems unconditionally and encourage their children to talk about any experiences that are meaningful to them, not only about school experiences.
- Improving parents’ reflective skills and self-control in critical situations (parents become aware of conflict situations and, instead of acting inappropriately, they use some of the stress and anger management techniques they have learned).
- Using the newly learned techniques not only for parenting purposes but also in their marital and even social relationships (for example, participating parents start using the “I message” technique when communicating with their life partners as well as with their neighbours).
- Positive discipline by replacing discipline techniques that rely on physical punishment with more child-friendly methods (for example, parents explain why they are not pleased with the child’s behaviour).
- Increased self-confidence as a result of parents’ interaction with the other participants in a context which focuses on positive experiences. Also, given that the parent education programme is a form of group intervention, participants have the opportunity to support and advise one another, which makes them feel more useful.
- Developing new skills and competencies. Parents often act in a way that is not very healthy for their own child, not because they are bad parents, but because they do not know how to act differently.

According to the “Report regarding the Impact of Parent Education on Parents and Children” (2013), developed by HoltIS with funding from UNICEF in Romania following the research carried out in the



“Developing the Local Network of Parent Educators” project, the courses have the following effects on participating parents:

- Parents increased concern for both self-care and childcare.
- More time spent with children and parents’ greater involvement in various activities with children, including in homework and schoolwork support.
- Parents greater interaction with the school due to the fact that the parent educators were teachers.
- Closer relationships and more effective communication between parents and school representatives (parent educators and other teachers).
- Integration of Roma parents into the group of Romanian parents, which helps Roma parents integrate into the community and establish a closer relationship with school.
- Helping parents build support networks, increase the frequency and quality of their interaction, and build solidarity networks which can be extended to the entire community.



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