**VIRGINIA STATEWIDE PARENT EDUCATION COALITION (VSPEC)**

 In 2005, the Virginia Department of Health and Prevent Child Abuse Virginia organized VSPEC ass part of the Virginia Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (VECCS) state plan through the Maternal Child Health Bureau. VSPEC consists of state and community stakeholders and service providers who work together to support a common vision, mission, and set of core values. The Coalition works to identify gaps in parent education and to strengthen services.

 A three-person panel presented a workshop about VSPEC at the “*Insure Their Future: Invest in Children”* Child Abuse Prevention Conference in Richmond in April, 2013. The panel included Angela Borsella, Ph.D., Patricia Hein, MSW, and Carol Dolber McMurray, MSW, ACSW, all members of the VSPEC Best Practices Committee.

 An overall goal of VSPEC is to increase the quality of parent education programs. They want to acquaint parent educators with evidence-based programs that have been proven effective. Efforts starting in 2007 were to identify what programs were currently offered in the Commonwealth, how accessible the programs were and to identify the costs associated with each program. The survey garnered 190 responses. “We realized that people were eager for information and training,” said McMurray. “That revelation led to offering an annual conference. The first conference was in 2007 and this year will be our fifth conference.” In an effort to publicize VSPEC to a larger audience, the group was one of the co-sponsors for the annual Child Abuse Prevention Conference in April, 2013 sponsored by the Virginia Department of Social Services and Prevent Child Abuse Virginia. Anyone interested in being placed on the VSPEC mailing list may contact Allison Perry at PCAV: aperry@pcav.org

 Another effort is identifying the characteristics common to evidence-based programs. While compiling this information, members realized that parenting programs were not a single entity. “Programs differ by level of intensity and the populations they are designed to assist,” noted Hein. “We are creating a guide to help people determine what level a program represents,” added Dr. Borsella.

The draft guide describes three levels of parent education programs: Primary; Secondary; and Tertiary. Primary programs are sometimes termed ‘universal’ programs. They are geared towards the general population and enhance parent knowledge and skills on a wide range of topics. Secondary programs are offered to parents and/or children who may be at risk for child maltreatment. They focus on increasing parent knowledge and skill in areas known to be associated with maltreatment risk. Parents participating in Secondary programs may or may not have court involvement. Tertiary programs are offered to parents and children who have experienced abuse or neglect. These programs not only address risk areas, knowledge, and skills, but also foster understanding of how parents’ early experiences and belief systems influence their parenting choices. Parents are empowered to use their knowledge gained to make changes in parenting practices. Parents participating in Tertiary programs are often, but not always, court-referred.

Panelists stress that the needs of the parents must “fit”. “We need to determine what research tells us about which program is most effective for the parent’s level of need,” says McMurray. “Then we can send parents to a program that is likely to meet their need.” The panel stressed that parenting education is not therapy. “There is a need for wrap-around services or a parent coach to help parents who need more intensive assistance transfer knowledge gained in classes into practice,” notes Dr. Borsella.

According to Johanna Schuchert, Co-chair of VSPEC, the Coalition currently has about 100 members. There is no fee for membership and there are many benefits. Members receive e-mailed information; meeting announcements; access to a toolkit that helps members choose parenting programs that fit their needs; notifications about the annual conference; and minutes of the bi-monthly steering committee. Members can assist with policy development, network with others offering similar programs, and market their program. Schuchert notes that some states offer certification for parent educators and that topic has been discussed at Coalition meetings.

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Web site: [www.vahealth.org/childadolescenthealth/EarlyChildhoodHealth/VSPEC/index.htm](http://www.vahealth.org/childadolescenthealth/EarlyChildhoodHealth/VSPEC/index.htm)

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