

Prochaska and Norcross Model of the Change Process*

Many people who attend parenting groups come because they want to change; they want to become more effective parents who promote their children's healthy development. But change is a challenging process, even when people want it and come looking for it. The challenge is even more formidable for those parents who are forced, through circumstances, to attend parenting groups. When change is imposed from outside, the process rarely succeeds. (You can read more about this subject on pages 63 – 64.)

Understanding the complexity of the change process will help you create programs and interventions that fit with the stage of readiness of participants in your parenting groups. As facilitator, you will be able to create conditions that promote personal change at all stages and thereby improve the outcome of the program for all participants and their families.

Six stages

Prochaska and Norcross' have outlined a general model of change that can usefully be applied to parents who are in the process of changing the way they relate to their children. These authors describe six stages of change, each associated with a set of tasks to accomplish.

The model doesn't suggest that everyone changes at the same rate or in the same way. Depending on their characteristics and situation, individuals spend more or less time in each stage. Moreover, change is not necessarily linear. People may spiral back and forth from stage to stage, making real change hard to measure.

What the model makes clear is that the tasks associated with each stage remain the same, along with the processes that help an individual move through the stages. In this way, it serves as a guide to anyone who is making changes in their life or who is supporting someone else to change.

Precontemplation

In the first stage of the change process, called **precontemplation**, individuals have no intention of changing in the foreseeable future. People at this stage may be unaware or under-aware of ineffective patterns. Some do not recognize their difficulties; others realize that they have "faults," but they don't believe these faults need changing.

If you have participants in this stage in your group, they usually have not chosen to come on their own. Either an external authority has mandated them to attend or the person they are coming with (partner, spouse, etc.) has insisted that they participate. Expect people in the precontemplation stage to resist recognizing or modifying their behaviour. By doing consciousness-raising activities in the group, they may become more aware of the advantages and benefits of change.

As facilitator, you can plan activities that:

- increase the participants' knowledge about themselves, relevant information, attitudes, behaviour and their parenting situation.

Contemplation

In the next stage, **contemplation**, people are aware of a difficulty or a need to improve their parenting styles, and are seriously thinking about change. However, they have not made an explicit commitment to take action. They may be struggling with their ambivalence, intimidated by the costs of change: the amount of time, energy, effort and money required, along with what they might have to give up.

Many people stay stuck in this stage for quite a long time, often because they have only vague and hazy ideas about what to do to make the changes they want. When they come to a parenting group, they

need opportunities to reevaluate where they have been and what they might become. By participating in appropriate exercises, they can move through this stage towards more capable parenting.

You can help by planning self re-evaluative activities, in which participants can:

- assess how they feel and what they think about themselves in the context of various parenting situations
- clarify their values about parenting and families
- explore the fears associated with the unknown aspects of change in order to remove many of the common emotional blocks: "What will happen if I change?"

Preparation

Once they reach the third stage, **preparation**, people intend to take action in the near future. They may already have taken some "baby steps" to change their parenting, but usually without great success.

At this stage, people demonstrate a commitment to personal change, but aren't sure how to achieve it. In a parenting group, they can find support for their determination to change. They need to hear that change is possible and that they can do it.

As facilitator, you can help participants move through this stage by planning group activities that:

- highlight strengths on which to build
- clarify values and explore the deeper issues of how people can become more effective parents
- present knowledge related to the socio-emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual/moral needs of children
- address ways to discipline that promote independence and a positive sense of self
- explore different options and action plans from which to choose
- show that there are many ways to reach the same goal

- point out pitfalls and ways to avoid or minimize them
- recognize the difficulty of change and that success is not instantaneous
- reinforce an attitude that looks at mistakes as opportunities to learn and improve, not as a reason to give up

Action

The first three stages of the change process happen essentially within a person. In the fourth stage, **action**, change finally becomes visible from the outside. People actually act to change their behaviour, experiences, and/or environment in the direction of more effective patterns. By this point, they have already invested a considerable commitment of time and energy in the personal change process.

When participants in a parenting group reach this stage, they need external recognition for their efforts. They are also ready to build on their success to further extend their repertoire of skills.

You can support them by planning activities that:

- reinforce and validate progress
- build self-reliance by helping participants recognize and reward their own efforts
- continue to explore new alternatives to ineffective habits
- encourage applying skills at home

Maintenance

In the next stage of the change process, **maintenance**, people can consistently put their new behaviours into practice. They are working to consolidate their gains; however, they frequently need a boost in order to maintain morale and complete the change process.

When members of a parenting group reach this stage, a preventive approach will help them to continue using their new choices.

You can support them by planning activities that:

- make clear that setbacks are to be expected:
no one response will be effective every time
with all children in all contexts
- present alternate responses to common parenting situations
- explore more concrete ways of avoiding pitfalls

Termination

When people reach the final stage of the change process, **termination**, they no longer have to work at maintaining their new patterns. They have confidence in their abilities and a sense of self-efficacy across all related situations. At this point, they have completed the change process for themselves, but they may wish to support or mentor others.

Some members of a parenting group may have reached the termination stage of the change process in relation to behaviours that others are still struggling with. As facilitator, you can affirm them and tap into their success by planning activities that:

- create connections among group members
- encourage participants to recognize their strengths
- invite participants to share their experiences of new parenting patterns

Prochaska, J., & Norcross, J. (2002). Stages of change. In J. Norcross (Ed.), *Psychotherapy relationships that work* (pp. 303-313). New York: Oxford University Press.