



Parenthetical: An educational website for parents of teens

“It’s evidence-based information written in a fun, engaging format that helps me be a better parent.”

—Parent’s comment about Parenthetical website

Situation

Traditional face-to-face classes and parent groups have served as important sources of parent education and support for decades. Parent education provides increased opportunities to learn about child-rearing, meet other parents and discuss common experiences. As life grows busier and more challenging for families, parents need innovative approaches for accessing parenting resources and support.

Digital technology—computers, smart phones and tablets—have created powerful and accessible new ways for educating and supporting parents.

Yet, despite the fact that 85% of parents use online resources, very few evidence-based interventions use digital media—and none incorporate the active participation and user interaction of today’s technology.

Response

A group of UW-Extension Family Living specialists, with input from an advisory team of county and state colleagues, has been developing and testing a new approach to parent education and support. The group created a learner-centered, interactive, online learning community for parents called *Parenthetical*. The project seeks to use the Internet to bring around-the-clock parent education directly to parents so that they can access resources on an “as needed” basis.

In May 2013 the current version of *Parenthetical* (www.myparenthetical.com), was launched across Wisconsin and nationwide. The site targets mothers, fathers, family professionals and others who work with or raise teenagers. *Parenthetical* provides weekly posts (or articles) with age-specific, research-based parenting and child development information that also incorporates multimedia and interactive elements, such as videos and polls. Unlike most online parenting resources, *Parenthetical* provides opportunities for parents to actively process the information they received through interaction with the site’s facilitators and other parents on the website’s comment sections and “Wise Talk” question-and-answer forum.

The site’s popularity continues to grow. From May 2013 to July 2014 the site had nearly 15,000 visitors and over a third of those returned to the site at least once. Currently, there are over 900 registered participants who regularly follow the site and sign up to receive weekly email newsletters. Over one-third of *Parenthetical*’s visitors hail from Wisconsin; the rest visit from the other 49 states and international locations.

To better understand the impact of *Parenthetical*, a subset of 50 parent users were surveyed regarding the influence of *Parenthetical* on their parenting and their relationship with their teen.

Family Living Programs Impact Report

Outcomes

Parentetical had a noticeable effect on parents' ability to understand their own parenting and their teen's development. As a result of *Parentetical*, 94% of the parents surveyed indicated that they thought more about their parenting process. This process of reflecting on one's parenting, also called "meta-parenting," increases parents' preparedness and effectiveness when faced with a parenting challenge (Heath, 2006; Holden & Hawk, 2003). For example, one mother of three teenagers shared how reflecting on her parenting reactions helped her respond more effectively to her teen:

"I remember one newsletter that talked about listening to your teen during disagreements and really letting them know you hear what they are saying, even if you disagree or your answer is still no. That same day my almost 18-year-old and I had a disagreement and I was able to really listen and discuss with her the issue and come to an agreement, without a power struggle. Just being reminded by the newsletter to really listen helped me stay calm and try to listen before I responded."

The majority of the parents surveyed agreed that, as a result of *Parentetical*, their confidence in a variety of parenting skills had grown.

- 76% of parents indicated that they listened to their teen more.
- 77% felt better prepared to talk to their teen about important issues.
- 80% felt they were more effective at setting limits and/or disciplining their teen.
- 80% had a better understanding of the influence of development on their teen's thinking and actions.

Parentetical also helped parents cope with the emotional challenges of parenting a teen.

- One in two parents indicated that they had less conflict with their teen, less parenting stress, or less worry about parenting a teen as a result of using *Parentetical*.
- 84% of parents said that, as a result of *Parentetical*, they recognized the similarities between their experience as a parent and those of other parents.

Parents reported that they valued *Parentetical*. The access to reliable, parenting information, the opportunity to hear from parenting experts, and the University/Extension connection had the most influence on parents' decision to use *Parentetical*.

Parents valued the quality content and engaging format. Comments included:

- *"It's short, easy to read, pertinent topics; because it's produced by professionals from the Extension office it's information I can trust."*
- *"Evidence-based information written in a fun, engaging format that helps me be a better parent."*

Parents found the information on *Parentetical* valuable enough to share it with others. Two-thirds of parents recommended *Parentetical* to a friend, co-worker or family member:

- *"I have forwarded the newsletters to friends and family, especially when it had a topic I know they are dealing with in parenting their children."*
- *"I sometimes forward the articles to my husband."*
- *"My 92-year-old mother lives with me and my 10-year-old. I have shared some of the information that provided some insights to behavior."*

Two out of three parents reported that they had told someone about something they learned on *Parentetical*, such as developmental information and parent-child relationship skill building, such as how the teenage brain works, ideas about communication with teens, and teens' sleep patterns.

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Through their evaluation responses, parents indicated that using *Parentetical* built confidence in their parenting skills, encouraged reflection on their parenting process and fostered an understanding of the connection between their teens' development and behaviors. Parents shared the content and skills learned on *Parentetical* with friends, co-workers, partners, and family members. Parents also reported applying the skills learned through *Parentetical* within their relationship with their teen.

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