

Review

The History and Usage of Parenting Newsletter Interventions in Family Life Education

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Abstract: Raising a child engages parents/caregivers in learning knowledge and skills needed for effective, healthy parenting. The field of parent and family education furnishes a variety of approaches and resources intended to assist and guide those raising and working with children. The Diffusion of Innovations Theory presents a clear framework for understanding how particular resources may develop and become more widely used in parent and family education. Among such resources, parenting newsletter interventions represent a unique and valuable approach to facilitating growth in parent/caregiver confidence, knowledge and skills. This paper provides an overview of the history and usage of newsletters in parent education in contexts including public health, extension and other settings. Further, it highlights key findings, challenges and future directions for parent newsletter interventions in the 21st century landscape of family life education.

Keywords: parent education; family life education; parenting newsletters; parenting resources; prevention programs

1. Introduction

When an individual assumes the role of parent or caregiver, typically there is a corresponding increase in efforts to seek out and acquire knowledge and skills that will assist in the parenting process [1]. Parenting challenges range from soothing the cries of an infant to guiding a teen through the onset of puberty and much more. Due to such challenges, the experience of parenting encourages learning and growth so individuals can effectively carry out the activities involved in raising a child. Caregivers depend on a variety of sources to gain information on raising children [2,3]. In this context, parents pursue sources of knowledge and guidance to aid them in increasing their understanding of children, learn how to establish a supportive and caring environment, and acquire needed confidence and skills for effectively raising children [2–4].

The resources and approaches utilized in the field of parent and family education developed gradually across time as efforts to meet the identified needs of children and the caregiving concerns of adults [5,6]. The roots of parent and family education sprouted from diverse disciplines in multiple countries beginning in the 19th century and today involve thousands working with individuals and families in contexts ranging from social work to public health to business [7]. Across time there has been substantial innovation and expansion with regard to the resources that are utilized in furnishing education and guidance to parents/caregivers engaged in raising children. Parenting newsletter interventions represent one singular and targeted type of educational resource that has a rich history and usage among tools employed in parent and family education [8–10]. This paper focuses on framing the role of parent newsletter interventions in parent and family education, exploring the history and

usage of parent newsletters in the field, and addressing important findings, challenges and future directions regarding such resources in family life education.

2. Prevention Science and Parent Education

In seeking to reduce the negative impact of life difficulties and strengthen resilience in individuals, the field of prevention science has developed and matured considerably since the mid-20th century [11]. Prevention science is informed by a diverse set of complementary disciplines that address issues of human development, well-being and relationships, with a specific focus on developing strategies and resources to minimize human difficulties [12]. Though considered a still-developing field, prevention science has devoted substantial focus to “the development of programs and policies that have demonstrated efficacy to prevent behavioral and health problems and promote well-being by targeting these empirically identified risk and protective factors, representing great potential for enhancing public health and well-being” [13]. Both prevention science and parent education interweave theories, concepts, methods, approaches and resources contributed from diverse fields such as social work, family and consumer sciences, psychology, medicine, public health, economics, and education [7,11,12]. Parent education is a critical domain among the areas encompassed under the larger umbrella of prevention science.

The field of parent education addresses quality of life and health of parents and children with respect to their growth, activities, interactions and familial relationships [14]. Stolz and Sizemore [7] suggest that, “Parenting education, broadly defined, includes all efforts to instill in parents a desire to parent well and to provide the knowledge and skills deemed necessary to do so” [7] (p. 191). Historical settings where parent training and support efforts developed and flourished in the United States included community groups led by women, social welfare groups focused on child welfare and education, programs in domestic sciences (family and consumer sciences, etc.) and faith community efforts in education and ministry [5,7,14]. However, such efforts have also spread and developed worldwide with abundant evidence of parent training and support efforts in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, South America, the Middle East, and other locations [15]. Among these diverse efforts, twin goals in parent education have involved developing applicable material to provide to parents or adult caregivers and also establishing constructive approaches for transmitting such material to parents. These goals and related needs have informed the foundations and maturation of parent education as a discipline and movement, thus leading over time to its expansion and formal establishment as a field of practice [14]. In addition to such developments, much of the content and delivery of parent education efforts continues to occur in informal settings by individuals such as relatives, paraprofessionals or community professionals.

Similar to other disciplines, there continue to be new developments in parent and family education as it moves forward into the 21st century [14,15]. The mechanisms by which such changes arise and become useful within the field provide insight for both the past and future of parent and family education. A major theory of such processes, the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, will be discussed in the next section to provide a framework and context for a specific innovation in the field of parent and family education. Some key developments in the field of parent and family education involve increased professional mechanisms for networking and collaboration, an infusion of research-based knowledge on raising children and their development, and new patterns for delivering educational material to parents and caregivers.

Prevention science seeks fundamentally to address human concerns, such as the raising of children, through identifying innovations that can be adopted and shared across contexts, centered in good research, and delivered using effective means to specific populations [11]. Parenting newsletter interventions represent one historic innovation and resource within the field that fit well with all these objectives. For individuals working in parent and family education, such organizations as the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) and also the National Parenting Education Network (NPEN) provide awareness of emerging resources such as newsletters or curricula [7,16,17].

In addition, structured systems such as the Cooperative Extension Service, national healthcare systems, or other collaborative networks make adoption and sharing of such resources as parenting newsletter interventions more possible and rapid [14,18]. Incorporating new or important scientific findings on raising children into parent education is another priority, yet such efforts can be hampered by the slow pace of updating textbooks or parenting curricula [17]. Yet, parenting newsletter interventions tend to be more flexible, inexpensive, and easy to update with new content from the field as it emerges. Parents and caregivers living in the “digital era” are also accessing such content on raising children in new ways. In addition to reaching those involved in raising children by sending them printed content, new technologies make it possible to re-imagine newsletter interventions and their usage through texting, apps, social media platforms, or other mechanisms [3,14]. Among the tools available to professionals working in parent and family education, parenting newsletter interventions provide a tangible example of innovation that has occurred in the field and highlight both past efforts and future possibilities.

To facilitate an investigation of this topic, we deployed a comprehensive literature review strategy to conduct a broad review of the relevant literature on the topic of parenting newsletters in family life education. To be clear, this process was not a systematic data analysis of existing research on the effectiveness of parenting newsletters based on specific research outcomes (which is a project beyond the scope of this effort). Instead, this project was focused on a historical overview of the development, usage, and current scholarship on parenting newsletters as a unique resource in the field of parent and family education. We commenced a broad literature search for this topic with the objective of categorizing available studies that concentrated on parenting newsletters as a tool in parent and family education. Multiple databases were utilized for this effort, specifically including ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), PsycINFO (with PsycARTICLES), Sociological Abstracts, Web of Science, and PubMed. A combination of selected terms were used in the database searches, including: *newsletters for parents*; *parenting newsletters*; *newsletters in parent education*; *reaching parents with newsletters*; *parenting education resources*; and *newsletter interventions*. Criteria that were utilized to sift abstracts and full-text articles for inclusion were: (1) articles focused on parenting newsletters or very similar resources; (2) articles addressed content, context or research with parenting newsletters; (3) articles were produced between 1940 and 2018. In addition, we examined the references of articles discovered in our search to find further sources. As a result, we included 55 publications (journal articles; book chapters; theses; technical reports) that aligned with our inclusion criteria. A summary of each article was prepared that outlined its components relative to the overview of this topic. Since this project sought to substantively review the history and usage of such newsletters, many articles were included that were older as the inclusion criteria did not restrict articles to only a more recent time period.

3. Diffusion of Innovations Theory and the Landscape of Parent Education

In the landscape of parent and family education, a variety of resources and approaches are available which are designed to furnish parents and caregivers with information, insight, key practices, and social support in their efforts to guide and nurture children [7,14]. No single resource or approach meets the needs of the diverse situations that parents face. Historically, such approaches as usage of mass media, group discussion, and direct instruction for caregivers have been relied on to reach those working with children [7,14]. However, such issues as limited reach of such methods, time difficulties, and cost have also hampered the impact of such approaches [10]. In the mid-20th century, the concept of parenting newsletter interventions was first introduced in the United States and provides an instructive example of an innovation that evolved over time and has continued until today.

Getting new ideas adopted can be challenging. Many new ideas, or innovations, go through a well-conceptualized process that can be learned and pursued strategically. Everett M. Rogers conceptualized the Diffusion of Innovations Theory to explain “the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” [19] (p. 5).

The four key elements of diffusion are (a) innovation, (b) communication channels, (c) time, and (d) social systems [19]. In fact, the innovation of parent and family education as a formalized field and the distribution of its related materials to parents and families took time to evolve and expand, finally being accepted as a discipline [5,16]. The framework outlined by Rogers offers a useful lens through which to examine the evolution of parent and family education and the use of parenting newsletters as an innovation in that context.

The Cooperative Extension Service in the United States is known for being “one of the world’s most successful technology transfer systems” and its systems are recognized around the world for the “diffusion of technological innovations” [20] (p. 493). The Cooperative Extension System focuses on developing educational resources and extending knowledge and positive practices to citizens for their well-being, including in parent and family education, and thus is concerned about reaching individuals and families effectively. As a result, Rogers’ Diffusion of Innovations Theory serves as a key framework for extension outreach methods [21]. The purpose of the Cooperative Extension Service was clearly stated in the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 [22]. The act plainly conveys that extension workers are change agents, and that diffusion of useful ideas, techniques and resources is a fundamental concern of the Cooperative Extension Service [22]. As stated in the Smith-Lever Act, the purpose of the Cooperative Extension Service is, “to aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information” [23] (Section 1). Programs resulting in increased knowledge and changed behavior are a primary goal of the Cooperative Extension Service, which fits well with the primary objectives pursued in parent and family education [24].

In parent and family education, differing concepts and approaches and resources emerge as efforts are made to share new knowledge and improve parenting practices [7]. A particular innovation goes through the innovation–decision process as knowledge is gained and a decision is made to adopt or reject the innovation. An innovation is “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” [19] (p. 12). The decision related to usage of an innovation is not an instantaneous act but rather a process [19]. This process was first conceptualized by Ryan and Gross in 1943 with their study of the diffusion of hybrid corn in the agricultural sector [25]. Similarly, new techniques and resources emerge in the field of parent and family education but may or may not be adopted widely. Today, scholars recognize five stages of the innovation–decision process: (a) knowledge, (b) persuasion, (c) decision, (d) implementation, and (e) confirmation [19].

In the knowledge stage, individuals gain awareness of an innovation and understand its function. For parent and family education, this might mean learning about a new body of research such as the effects of childhood trauma or becoming aware of a new parenting curriculum on raising children with special needs. Next, individuals form an attitude about the innovation in the persuasion stage, either favorably or unfavorably, before entering the decision stage. It is during the decision stage that individuals participate in activities that lead them to either adopt or reject the innovation. For example, an educator or community worker might order a parent education resource, review its content and application, and get feedback from individuals in a target population about the resource. Sometimes a cue to action can help to crystallize the decision. A cue to action can be described as an event that occurs either naturally or as the result of some action by a change agency that leads to a decision. An example of this might be that a local or state government agency indicates it will provide supportive funding to implement a new parenting innovation, such as a newsletter for first-time parents, which would trigger an educator’s decision to adopt that particular resource. During the implementation stage, individuals put the innovation to use. Sometimes during this stage reinvention occurs when an individual may modify or change an innovation to better suit the needs of a particular context or population. Finally, the confirmation stage takes place when the individual’s decision with regard to an innovation is either reinforced or perhaps reversed [19]. Among innovations in the landscape of parent and family education, parenting newsletter interventions represent a unique and compelling example of innovation that is explained well by the Diffusion of Innovations Theory.

As noted, there are several elements that play a role in the diffusion process. Communication channels are important to diffusion, as they describe the means by which information about the innovation is shared among individuals. Impersonal channels such as mass media can be used, or more personal channels such as a conversation between individuals can be utilized to share a resource or innovation. Parent newsletter interventions are somewhat unique in that they both fit the concept of communication channels as a particular method of communication (mailed or distributed newsletter) and also fit into existing communication channels (can be shared personally between individuals or highlighted as an available resource by mass media). Deciding on which method to use in sharing an innovation depends on what stage of the innovation–decision process the individual is in. Although homophily, the degree to which individuals are similar, is important for forming favorable attitudes, some degree of heterophily, the degree to which individuals differ, is needed to bring new innovations into groups of people [19]. For individuals working within similar systems where parent and family education exists, such as the Cooperative Extension Service or pediatric settings, an innovation such as a parenting newsletter intervention is more likely to be shared and take root in that system before being adopted across other settings.

In addition, both time and social systems are important to the diffusion of innovations. The rate of adoption and the different adopter categories both involve time. The rate of adoption is the speed at which an innovation is adopted by individuals in a social system [19]. It is best represented by an s-curve, where the innovation diffuses slowly in the beginning, and then has a period of rapid growth, and tapers off toward the end. The social system in which individuals exist can affect their innovativeness, thus placing them into different adopter categories identified by Rogers [19]. With regard to parent and family education, particular individuals or organizations may thus either boost adoption of an innovation or limit adoption depending on their mindset.

In the Diffusion of Innovations framework, the adopter categories include (a) innovators, (b) early adopters, (c) early majority, (d) late majority, and (e) laggards. Each category has its distinct characteristics [19]. Innovators compose about 2.5% of the population and are venturesome, daring, cosmopolitan, and often have financial resources allowing them to be risky. Although not always respected by their peers, they are important to the diffusion process because they are the ones who go outside of their local networks and bring new ideas into the system [19]. The next group, early adopters, compose 13.5% of the population. They are localized, respected in their social groups, and are the individuals to “check with” before adopting an innovation. Early adopters are role models and bring the highest degree of opinion leadership [19]. The last group that adopts just before the average individual in a social system is the early majority, which makes up 34% of the population. This group is deliberate and has frequent interactions with peer groups, but they are seldom considered opinion leaders in a social system [19]. Those in the late majority group adopt just after the average. Like the early majority, this group also composes 34% of the population. They have scarce resources and most of the uncertainty must be gone before they feel it is safe to adopt. They are skeptical and cautious of new innovations and may adopt based on economic necessity or peer pressure [19]. Laggards, the last group to adopt, account for 16% of the population, tending to be traditional, suspicious of change, resistant to innovations, and many are isolated from their social systems [19]. For those wishing to persuade others to adopt an innovation in parent and family education, it is useful to think of those individuals or organizations that fit into the “innovator” or “early adopter” categories and how they might facilitate adoption of an innovation.

As previously mentioned, opinion leadership is often found within the group of early adopters. Opinion leaders greatly influence the adoption of an innovation [19]. They offer advice and provide their “stamp of approval” for other members of a social system. Opinion leaders serve as a model for others and reach a large number of people through their behaviors [19]. They are the trendsetters and cause an innovation to “take off” within a field. If change agents, professionals and paraprofessionals working in parent and family education in this case, can identify and mobilize the opinion leaders in a social system, the diffusion of innovations will be much more successful [19]. With regard to such

innovations, parenting newsletter interventions furnish a historically useful example to understand how such an innovation has developed and taken root and flourished in the field of parent and family education.

4. History and Usage of Newsletters in Parent Education

The approach of providing parents or other caregivers with information on key parenting topics via reading material is a practice that likely predates the formal era of parent education. Early examples of such approaches include self-help and how-to books related to domestic life that were used between 1800 and 1850, periodicals targeted at mothers such as *The Mother* magazine, and other written materials [26]. These and other efforts in school settings, social work, and other fields began to coalesce in the first half of the 20th century and led toward the establishment of parent and family education as an emerging field [16].

The need for useful sources of information on healthy parenting has likely expanded in contemporary times as parents spend less direct time associating with others and learning through observation or obtaining informal feedback on their parenting concerns [2]. As a result, a range of more formal interventions to support parents has emerged ranging from parenting brochures to in-depth courses and support groups. In a conceptual framework denoting levels of intervention with families, Doherty proposed a “continuum approach” to thinking about interventions in parent education and shared a Levels of Family Involvement Model with five levels [27]. In this conceptual formulation, a parenting newsletter intervention is most accurately classified as a combination of level one (one-way communication) and level two (sharing information and advice) activity in the framework of parent education. We employ the term “intervention” in describing parenting newsletter series since they have been conceptualized from early beginnings as systematic, programmed methods of reaching parents with a defined target audience, research-based content, and delivery strategy [8,10].

4.1. From *Pierre the Pelican* to Public Health Efforts in Parent Education

It is generally acknowledged by a number of researchers that one of the very first systematic, sustained efforts to provide parents of young children with helpful information on parenting was launched in 1947 with the *Pierre the Pelican* newsletter series [28,29]. A Louisiana-based public health professional, Dr. Loyd Rowland, was the original developer of this series and intended it to consist of age-paced information that was easy to understand and appealing to the average parent. This newsletter series went out monthly to parents during a child’s first year and then bimonthly after that (18 issues), based on the idea that it would convey essential knowledge of child development and reduce parental anxiety [30]. The materials were billed as “mental health pamphlets” and took a preventive approach to difficulties in raising a young child. The initiative was supported by the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, which was established in 1941 at the University of Texas by a philanthropically inclined family, and aimed to reach “a strategic group upon which educators in mental health may center their effort” [31]. In this case, Dr. Rowland might be identified as an “innovator” who developed the innovation, and the public health system in Louisiana furnished the “social system” that allowed for its adoption and spread over time.

Each newsletter was typically five to six pages long, was distributed to “the parents of firstborn children,” offered conversational advice from the folksy and friendly view of “*Pierre the Pelican*” and included short articles such as “How Much Attention Should You Pay the Baby?” or “Putting Things in the Mouth” [32]. This series soon was sent statewide to families in Louisiana and continued for 55 years until 2002; additionally, the newsletter series would go on to be used in over 20 states and at least four foreign countries (Italy, Germany, Hungary, and Turkey) [33]. The newsletter series was typically implemented by county- or state-level public health departments, hospital systems, or other interested entities. Early research on the *Pierre the Pelican* series represents the earliest scholarship done on such interventions and also furnishes promising evidence that such efforts can be a useful tool in the field of primary prevention [34]. A statewide survey of over 1200 *Pierre the Pelican* newsletter

recipients in North Carolina in 1950 showed that 90% of parents saved the pamphlets and over 80% volunteered that it was helpful to them [29]. This newsletter series was a genuine innovation in the field of parent and family education that was quite unique among approaches used at the time of its introduction. Additionally, its diffusion was supported by the usage of strong communication channels (mailed distribution; shared support among public health professionals) and the support of an established social system in the public health sector. This useful resource represented a pioneering effort in reaching parents with newsletter interventions and set the stage for other efforts in the arena of health care.

While exploration of newsletter interventions in the public health sector has generally focused on health-specific concerns such as obesity or smoking or physical activity, there are a couple of other examples related to support for parenting. Perhaps the most well-known example is the Triple P (Positive Parenting Program) parenting intervention. Public health systems both in the United States and internationally have investigated and implemented either selective or population-wide public health interventions using the Triple P framework. In this context, parenting newsletters are “blended” with more intensive interventions and typically form just one minor part of a “multi-level system of parenting interventions to strengthen parenting” and also reduce child maltreatment and child behavioral concerns [35]. Some public health scholars have argued that increasing parent knowledge of effective parenting strategies is an important approach to improving public health [36]. Thus, here you see elements of the innovation–decision process (persuasion, etc.) continuing with regard to usage of parenting newsletter interventions, however the approach has been modified to “blend” with more intensive approaches for elevated impact.

In regard to a public health approach to foster healthy parenting, Berkule and colleagues note that the “pediatric primary care platform has been of particular interest, given its potential for scalability, population-level impact, and low cost” and also that “a number of public health initiatives have been developed to enhance parenting self-efficacy and [parent–child] interactions” [37] (p. 461). While more well-known examples of such parent education efforts in the health care sector focus on home visitation programs such as the Nurse Family Partnership (NFP), more recent and limited-intervention approaches have involved the Video Interaction Project (VIP) and the *Building Blocks* (BB) initiative. The *Building Blocks* approach “uses mailed parenting newsletters [and] learning materials” in order to “educate and communicate with parents” [37] (p. 461). The *Building Blocks* approach does not typically involve direct visits but instead focuses on “monthly age-specific newsletters” sent for the child’s first 6 months, which “provide specific information on child development, play and learning activities, and general parenting information” written at a 3rd–4th grade level in a “clean, simple, user-friendly format” [37] (p. 463). Additionally, typically a learning resource (toy, book, etc.) is also sent monthly with the newsletter, and parents complete a developmental questionnaire twice to encourage them in getting their young child to developmental screenings. The *Building Blocks* newsletter intervention illustrates the continuation of this type of innovation, again supported by implementation using clear communication channels and the social system of pediatric care, but also modified for higher effectiveness. This approach supported in pediatric settings has been systematically investigated for effectiveness in recent years in a linked series of rigorous evaluative studies, often using a randomized controlled trial method and comparing multiple parent interventions including the *Building Blocks* newsletter [37–40]. This body of evidence examining the value and effectiveness of the *Building Blocks* parenting newsletter in pediatric care settings is currently the most advanced project that seeks to understand this type of preventive intervention.

4.2. Cooperative Extension and Its History of Parenting Newsletter Interventions

It is interesting to note that this innovation model of a timely, age-paced newsletter series for parents of children at differing ages has continued to be the primary model upon which most parenting newsletter versions are based. Parent educators assert that such an approach offers parents valuable information when it is most desired (at a child’s birth and early years), allows a “paced” method for

sharing information when it is most appropriate (linked to a child's age and current issues), and reaches out to parents who may not otherwise seek out a class or support group [41]. While differing entities ranging from health care systems to public schools adopted or implemented such parenting newsletters, perhaps the most widespread adoption and promotion of these "learn-at-home educational [resources]" occurred in the nationwide system of the Cooperative Extension Service [42] (p. 2, 4).

Formally known as CSREES (Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service), in the United States the Cooperative Extension Service is a federal-state-county partnership that draws funding from all three levels, combines federal administrators and university-level scholar-practitioners and region- or county-level educators in an educational system, and focuses on leveraging this cooperative effort to "extend the availability of the educational resources of an institution" [43] (p. 67). Among the educational priorities in this system, providing educational resources related to family living and human development is a key program focus and is mandated by the congressional Smith-Lever Act of 1914 [23,43]. While differing resources in this area have been developed and were offered over the course of the 20th century, the 1970s era saw the arrival of parenting newsletter interventions as a major tool in the arsenal of parent and family educators in Cooperative Extension. As noted earlier, this social system integrated the diffusion of innovations framework into its operations and thus made adoption of specific innovations more likely [19,20]. The CSREES model of diffusion encouraged sharing of educational resources across state systems and enabled the rapid expansion of parenting newsletter interventions during this time period.

Cudaback and colleagues conducted a nationwide study in the United States investigating the usage of "age keyed parent education leaflets" in state extension systems in 1982 [44]. Responses from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Guam showed that 19 states (36.5%) reported specific usage of such parenting newsletter series, 16 states (30.8%) indicated sharing information for parents of young children but not a newsletter series, and 17 states (32.7%) reported no usage of parenting newsletters. All of the efforts to implement usage of parenting newsletter series in varied state extension systems had occurred within the prior five years (since 1976 or later), which was referred to as "a fairly new and growing effort" [44] (p. 2). Among the 19 states using a newsletter series at the time, the target audiences that received newsletter information included expectant parents (37%), parents of 0–1 year olds (100%), parents of 1 and 2 year olds (26%), and parents of 3 or 4 year olds (10%) [44]. This pattern illustrates the rapidity with which parenting newsletter interventions were adopted within the social system of the Cooperative Extension Service once they were formally introduced.

Cudaback, Dickinson, and Wiggins conducted a study of ten states using age-paced newsletters in their state extension systems in the mid-1980s and reported that the resources used were "developed by family life and child development specialists in these states' University Cooperative Extension programs" [45] (p. 173). In a sense, these individuals represent "innovators" and "early adopters" of the parenting newsletter as an innovation in the field. Further, a review of the varying newsletters showed that they were "remarkably similar in purpose and content" and also delivery method, which is not inconsistent with the Cooperative Extension pattern of sharing and duplicating educational resources [45]. A related overview of 21 newsletter series being used in 19 states showed that the "most widely used parent newsletters" were developed by Dr. Shirley O'Brien of Arizona Cooperative Extension and accounted for "almost 50% of all parent education newsletters used by Cooperative Extension nationally" [44] (pp. 2–3). Dr. O'Brien's multiple newsletter series included *Waiting Times* (expectant parents), *Cradle Crier* (parents of babies zero to one), *Crib Courier* (parents of children one to two), *Toddler Tattler* (parents of children two to three), *Teddy Bear Telegraph* (parents of children three to four), and *Fourth Wheeler* (parents of children four and older). Dr. O'Brien can be identified as another "innovator" in the field who was on the leading edge of producing parent newsletter interventions, and being connected to the Cooperative Extension System made available a social system for the early adoption and usage of this innovation. As the usage of such educational resources spread more widely, nearly half or more states adopted or began their own efforts to use parenting newsletters by 1990 [46]. A specific example is the *Parent Express* age-paced newsletter series, which was developed

by the social work staff in the Cooperative Extension Program at the University of California-Berkeley in the mid-1980s, and was specifically designed for teenage and low income parents [47]. The effort to identify and target specific audiences of need (teenage parents, etc.) beyond “parents of young children” represented another step in the evolution of such resources that has continued. Additionally, this pattern is consistent with the group being “early adopters” of an innovation who then modified it for a specific audience or need while enhancing its diffusion, a step that Rogers refers to as “reinvention” of a particular innovation that enhances its usage [19].

Another widely used newsletter, *Parenting the First Year*, began as a pilot project within the state extension service in Wisconsin in 1982 and evolved to an expanded edition in 1988. Cooperative Extension in Wisconsin had already piloted and tested the feasibility of a “series of learn-at-home packets based on the expressed needs and interests of young families” in 1978–1979, which resulted in 10 packets on topics including “parenthood, family management, consumer decision-making, credit and child and family nutrition” [48] (p. 388). The follow-up project involved delivery of twelve monthly newsletters to parents during a child’s first year of life [42]. One reviewer explained, “Each of the twelve issues of *Parenting the First Year*, published by Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service and used by [multiple] other states, educates readers on occurrences that typically make parents frustrated or angry and apt to lash out at their babies” [46] (p. 12). By 1992, the newsletter intervention was being delivered to nearly half of all Wisconsin families with newborns each year, and this pattern has continued for three decades [49]. This example provides a nice illustration of how the innovation–decision process worked over time with a parenting newsletter intervention. It was introduced through a pilot project, research was done to persuade a decision for its adoption, and then it was implemented and spread statewide. The project promotes a community partnership approach, with each of 61 county extension offices coordinating with partners including Kiwanis clubs, hospitals and health clinics, local businesses, and other groups to reach thousands of families on a monthly basis via mailed newsletter or electronic delivery [49]. This effort shows focused attention to communication channels and social systems that can support this innovation and its sustainability. Careful field research on the effectiveness of *Parenting the First Year* has documented that it is rated highly by recipients, and that parents who receive it develop beliefs about raising children significantly less like those of child-abusing parents, report significantly less physical aggression toward young children, have more appropriate expectations of babies’ behavior, and note a greater reduction in the experience of daily stressors as parents [10,50–52]. Weatherspoon et al. have reported positive benefits also for the Spanish-language version of this newsletter series used with Mexican immigrant mothers [53]. Additionally, the estimated economic benefits of the intervention suggest up to nearly USD 7 in benefits for each dollar spent on the program [54]. Research on the effectiveness of this parenting newsletter series and continued refinement have led to its adoption in multiple other states, extension into the second and third years of a child’s life, and availability in both English and Spanish formats. This example highlights the diffusion process for a particular innovation over an extended period of time, including its early adoption, implementation, and research confirming its value as well as reinventions of the newsletter for other audiences.

Since issues that parents face and the educational arena are both dynamic, within Cooperative Extension there has been ongoing variety in topics addressed, target audiences specified, and research conducted on parenting newsletters. Much of this diverse work with parenting newsletter interventions in Cooperative Extension has occurred in the last two decades. The Diffusion of Innovations Theory notes that reinvention of a particular innovation is not uncommon as its utility becomes confirmed [19]. Additionally, being supported within a social system (Cooperative Extension) that encourages innovation and diffusion has led to multiple examples of such newsletter modifications. Efforts supporting new mothers specifically with supportive educational information via a packet or newsletters has continued. For example, Weigel and Martin examined exposure to the *Little Lives* newsletter series in Nevada using a qualitative study approach and found that parents indicated positive changes in their parental knowledge, confidence and skills [55]. Additionally, Futris and Stone

developed *The Guide for New Parents* and it has reached thousands of new mothers in Georgia, showing positive evidence of usefulness and also that it promoted greater awareness of Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) extension resources [4]. The extension faculty at Oregon State University led a pilot effort to combine the *Parenting the First Year* series with home visits to mothers in Mexican immigrant families, thus expanding the ethnic diversity of specified audiences [53]. Targeting fathers and father figures of young children, extension faculty at North Dakota State University teamed up to develop the *Father Times* newsletter (nine issues) and delivered it to parents of kindergarten-age children in 2003–2004. Findings indicated that a majority of parents read all or most of the newsletters, were highly satisfied with them, and showed modest changes in parental attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors [9,56]. This series has also been translated and utilized with Spanish-language audiences in multiple states.

Building on previous efforts, Bogenschneider and Stone developed a brief newsletter series for parents of adolescents and tested it, finding that parents who read all of them monitored teen activities more closely and were also more responsive to their teens [8]. Similarly, Dworkin et al. led a University of Minnesota extension effort to develop the *Teen Talk* newsletter series, two linked sets of five newsletters each, and found that parents typically read most or all of the content, gained information and skills to better communicate with teens, and felt less worried and frustrated as parents [57]. Hughes et al. piloted and examined a 14-issue newsletter series for divorced mothers through Illinois Cooperative Extension [58]. This variety of efforts displays the potential of parenting newsletter interventions to reach diverse audiences, address a range of parenting issues and continue to evolve as an innovation in parent and family education.

In the early part of the 21st century, a team of state extension specialists from across the United States launched an effort to update the content and expand the availability of age-paced parenting newsletter resources with the Just in Time Parenting initiative [59]. This group could again be classified as a group of “early adopters” who were seeking to modify or reinvent the parenting newsletter innovation for a new context of online delivery. This team worked to create a newsletter series that covered a child’s growth from the first month after birth through at least age six. The resulting *Just in Time Parenting* series is a colorful, web-based set of monthly newsletters filled with tips and articles on child development, child safety, healthy parenting, and related topics. The series is available free, comes in both English and Spanish, can be accessed online by anyone who is interested and is promoted through extension systems and local partnerships. The series, available as an electronic newsletter, is further supplemented by information shared via blogging, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media tools [60]. Assessment of delivering the newsletter series via an electronic platform has indicated that thousands of parents subscribe via email each year from throughout the United States, as well as internationally [61]. With the development of numerous digital technologies, it seems clear that the methods for packaging and sharing content on healthy parenting will continue to evolve [62]. Cooperative Extension has been at the forefront of such innovations and is well positioned to move forward as parenting newsletter interventions develop in new and creative ways. Further insight into the value of such resources can be gained by exploring how newsletter interventions have been adapted for use in settings outside the United States and studied in other contexts.

4.3. Parenting Newsletter Interventions in Europe

Parent and family education occurs in many locations and the diffusion of parenting newsletter interventions to diverse locales is another illustration of the diffusion process. In the United Kingdom, the government has invested in a variety of parenting supports and interventions guided by the philosophy that “every parent matters” [63]. Adapting the *Parenting the First Year* newsletter for a United Kingdom audience, the newsletter was re-titled *Baby Express* and a pilot project was established in 2003 that involved delivery of the resource to over 150 first-time mothers in England as part of a randomized, controlled trial. This project resulted in multiple studies highlighting some key findings from the intervention, including that parents found the newsletter to be more useful as a source of information on parenting than any other source relied on [64,65]. Subsequent research from this

project also indicated that parents in the United Kingdom who were in the “treatment” group read the newsletter resource, felt fewer daily “hassles” in their parenting, and had more healthy expectations of young children [52]. New parents in the United Kingdom typically receive a publication (“Birth to Five”) when a child arrives, but scholars there have advocated for the strategy of providing information in measured small doses over time via a newsletter intervention rather than in one single package at a child’s birth. In another example, the UK-based Trust for the Study of Adolescence built on the work of Bogenschneider and Stone [8], working to “develop and extend this work within a UK context” and “produce newsletters for parents of teenagers” [66] (p. 265). In this project, four theme-based newsletters were written and delivered to over 4000 families in the United Kingdom with children ages 11–16, and findings showed general support for their value in giving information and support to parents while also raising new considerations [66].

Elsewhere in Europe, Germany has developed a nationwide prevention program to improve parental health knowledge, which involves distribution of written educational materials when a child is born (“Parent Guide—Growing Up Healthy”) [67]. Similarly prompted by previously described newsletter interventions, this effort has shown positive results in a randomized, controlled trial with parents receiving the material showing higher levels of parental health knowledge and strong acceptance of the material [68]. These examples highlight the adoption of parenting newsletter-style interventions in Europe and their potential to contribute to the knowledge of healthy parenting among populations in widespread locales. The level of diffusion which may occur with such innovations in Europe and other locations across the world provides an interesting prospect for future developments in parent and family education.

4.4. Parenting Newsletters in an Evolving Technology Landscape

Parent and family education for many years occurred primarily in in-person contexts, such as parenting classes, or through educational resources an individual utilized in their own time and space (i.e., reading at home, etc.) [14]. Over time, technologies such as radio and television made sharing of educational content possible via mass-media channels [16]. Still later, a variety of technologies have emerged that allow content access in new ways such as video-based approaches, home computers, the Internet, and smartphones and tablets [3,62]. The Diffusion of Innovations Theory would suggest that the emergence of such communication channels, a key element of diffusing innovations, makes possible the increased adoption and adaptation of parenting newsletters as an educational resource [19].

In the age of electronic media, those working in parent and family education find that parents increasingly rely on such technologies for accessing information on raising children and resolving concerns [3]. In searching the available literature, we find that the rapid emergence and usage of such technologies has far outpaced the information captured and transmitted with regard to parenting newsletters and their implementation in an evolving technology landscape [62]. Nevertheless, in this “brave new world” of technological possibilities, there are a few tangible examples that illustrate how parenting newsletters have been adapted and diffused via such communication channels. With the emergence of the Internet, it became possible to place newsletter issues online for accessibility by content providers (e.g., a healthcare system) or directly by parents themselves. Perhaps the best example of such an effort is the Just in Time Parenting initiative noted previously, which has monthly parent newsletters available from the prenatal period through the time a child is 5 years old [59,61,62]. However, this approach also integrates a key feature of making newsletters useful, which is the timely delivery of information, by distributing the content directly to parents who sign up via a monthly email sent to their email inbox [62]. Other digital platforms being used for delivery of parenting information include text messaging programs, audio-based technologies (podcasting), and apps used on a table or smartphone that integrate text and short videos [3,62]. However, the integration of such platforms with existing newsletter materials seems to still be evolving and review of such efforts has not yet made it into existing literature on the topic (based on our review) and remains a topic for future exploration.

5. Key Research Findings on Parent Newsletter Interventions

As the development of newsletter interventions in parent and family education and their usage has matured over time, there has also been a corresponding increase in research conducted on various aspects of such newsletter resources [8–10]. We would however suggest that there remain substantial opportunities to explore newsletter interventions as a resource in parent and family education. For purposes of this paper, we briefly highlight some of the key research findings that have emerged regarding newsletter interventions relative to utility, usefulness, usage, application, and suggested benefits for recipients.

Prior to this summary, we briefly introduce five attributes identified in Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations framework which aid in decreasing the uncertainty of adopting an innovation (in this case, a parenting newsletter) [19]. These attributes are: (a) relative advantage; (b) compatibility; (c) complexity; (d) trialability; and (e) observability. An individual's perception of each attribute predicts the rate of an innovation's adoption. Relative advantage refers to an innovation being perceived as better than a past idea. For example, is receiving information via a parenting newsletter preferable to only having the option of receiving similar information through a formal parenting class? Additionally, innovations that are compatible with an individual's needs, values, and experience typically have a faster rate of adoption. In this case, parenting newsletters are readily adopted by parents due to ease of use and accessibility (relative advantage) as well as compatibility with what parents need and want. Next, if an innovation is overly complex its adoption will be slowed, but parenting newsletters are likely adopted readily by parents because of their simplicity. Parents do not have to coordinate family schedules to read a newsletter as they would need to with attending an in-person parenting class. The fourth attribute, trialability, simply refers to the ability to put an innovation into practice (to try it out), which speeds up adoption. In this context, many of the tips offered in parenting newsletters do not require supplies or tools to put into practice. For the most part, parents can try out tips and strategies presented in a newsletter almost immediately. Finally, being able to observe the results of an innovation speeds up its adoption. When parents, as well as parent and family educators, are able to see the positive results of parenting strategies encouraged in a newsletter, it increases the likelihood that they see value in this approach. Overall, innovations with greater relative advantage, compatibility, simplicity, trialability and observability have a faster rate of adoption than those that do not [19]. Each of these attributes is consistent with parenting newsletters as a resource and the Diffusion of Innovations framework helps to explain some of the research findings on this topic.

A fundamental question to ask regarding any specified resource or program intended for parent and family education is whether the resource has *utility* for a particular target audience or context. In other words, does the specified resource have a practical value for the intended audience or context? If so, the Diffusion of Innovations Theory suggests the approach likely has a "relative advantage" compared to other options. A number of studies related to parenting newsletters have cited research that reading was one of the methods of learning that parents and caregivers most preferred for gaining awareness of raising children [50,69,70]. This concept thus suggested that reading material on selected topics in child development and parenting would be of potential utility, indicating the likely relative advantage of parenting newsletters. Additionally, parent and family education fits well within the framework of adult education, which contends that individuals are most likely to learn when a specific need arises for information in their lives and it is matched with education on the topic that is shared in a manner that is convenient, interesting and simple to understand [14,16,69]. In other words, parents want to receive information in a simple, straightforward manner, just as Rogers noted with the attribute of complexity. Additionally, the Diffusion of Innovations Theory contends that individuals gain awareness about an innovation when they have a felt need, which in this case is credible parenting information [19]. Thus, the idea of sending mailed information to parents in a simple, accessible format like a newsletter gained interest, and was supported further by research indicating new or young parents often prefer experiencing such education at home via readable content [2,10], all of which aligns with Rogers' concept that innovations are more readily adopted when they are not complex [19].

Finally, to be of practical value a resource must be able to reach the intended population, and varied research studies have shown that newsletters can be effectively marketed or disseminated using diverse means such as other newsletters, professional agencies, newspapers, posters and fliers, radio or television, hospital or health care systems, schools, early childhood programs and businesses [28,50].

A second topic of interest regarding parent newsletter interventions is how participants perceive the *usefulness* of such a resource in their caregiving efforts. Again, does the newsletter approach have a relative advantage over previous ways of gaining parenting information? In a variety of studies examining newsletter interventions across different contexts, typically a substantial percentage (60% or higher) of those responding indicate that they find parenting newsletters to be a useful source of information on parenting or related topics [8–10,41,44,45,47]. For example, the *Parenting the First Year* newsletter or variations of it have been rated as “very useful” by 61% of respondents in a Wisconsin study [41], over 75% of Mexican immigrant mothers rated it as useful in varied parenting areas in an Oregon study [53], and 85% of parents receiving the newsletter found it to be “very useful” in a study in England [65]. Some studies have compared the perceived usefulness of a particular newsletter to other sources of information on the topic (such as parenting teens), thus furnishing a comparative assessment of how caregivers weigh the value of multiple sources of information. Riley and colleagues found that the *Parenting the First Year* newsletter was rated higher in its usefulness than six other comparable sources of information on raising young children [41]. Similarly, in Georgia it was found that a newsletter-style resource for new parents was perceived as being of similar or greater usefulness than 11 other information sources on parenting [71]. Rogers’ concept of relative advantage is mirrored in these research findings, in which parents indicate that they find a parenting newsletter resource to be of greater usefulness than other sources of information, and thus further explaining their value and adoption in parent and family education. Additionally, research has indicated that parents who perceive a newsletter intervention to be useful are more likely to report positive impacts on parenting knowledge or behavior as a result of reading the newsletter [9].

Another element in the available research on parent newsletter interventions explores the *usage* that newsletters receive by the target audience. Depending on the particular newsletter resource, respondents vary in their reports of how much of a parenting newsletter series they typically read when it is received. In keeping with the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the usage is likely to depend on the newsletter’s compatibility and complexity. Is it compatible with what they need? Is the newsletter simple enough for parents to pick up, read, and then apply the concepts? Futris and Stone found that typically between 60 to 80% of the new mothers receiving a newsletter-style resource read each of the articles included [71]. This is consistent with research from multiple other studies which involved parenting newsletters on young children, nearly all of which find that typically from two-thirds or more of parents report reading “most” or “all” of a newsletter series when it is received [41,45,50,53,58]. Some studies however have reported lower readership which seems linked to topic or demographic variables [8,9,66,70]. These findings suggest that Rogers’ concept of compatibility assists in understanding that parents likely read what most applies to them. In addition to reading them, Cudaback and colleagues found that over 70% of recipients shared the newsletter with at least one other person who read them [28]. Additionally, they found that more than half of parents receiving them (60%) kept and filed the newsletters for future reference [28]. In fact, it is a relatively common finding that a newsletter recipient typically shares the material with others (spouse or partner, parent, friend, etc.) who reads it and so the potential impact is multiplied [9,50,57]. Sharing of the resource or discussing it with others is a simple mechanism by which diffusion of the material is further enhanced, and this is made more likely due to the simplicity of sharing the content.

The bulk of research studies examining parenting newsletters explore the *application* of such interventions across multiple areas of parenting, including knowledge, self-confidence, behavior and relationship outcomes. Consistent with the concepts outlined in the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, a major question explored here is whether newsletters have high trialability (easy to apply) and observability. Can parents quickly put into practice the concepts and parenting strategies presented

in the newsletter? Can parents observe the outcomes of their new strategies when applied in their family relationships? A thorough review of such research is beyond the scope of this paper, but an increasing body of evidence is emerging that indicates newsletter interventions make modest but valuable contributions to parents and caregivers. Multiple studies focused on newsletters show that individuals typically report increased knowledge of child development, teen issues, or related topics as a result of reading parent newsletters [4,9,28,53,65,66]. Such newsletters also seem to bolster parents in their caregiving role, providing them with greater confidence about their choices as parents and the knowledge they have to be good parents. Several studies have specifically found that parents report increased self-confidence in their parental role or better adjustment as a result of reading parent newsletters [9,28,55,57,71]. The most commonly studied outcomes related to newsletter impacts focus on a wide range of parenting behaviors that may be influenced by reading and applying the knowledge and practices encouraged in parent newsletters. For parents of young children, a variety of studies using self-report measures have shown that parents indicate positive impacts including talking to babies, more physical affection, being more responsive or playful, using better health and safety practices, and more positive discipline approaches [9,28,41,44,45,47,50,53]. All of these examples suggest that parenting newsletters can help to facilitate such behavioral outcomes when the trialability (ease of application) of ideas and strategies is higher. Additionally, studies involving parents and young children using observational measures or randomized controlled trial designs have shown positive impacts on behaviors including fewer daily parenting hassles, improved play interactions, and a more stimulating home environment [39,40,52]. For parents of teens, studies have reported that parent newsletters have resulted in improved parent–child communication, less worry and frustration about parenting, and closer monitoring of teen activities [8,57,66]. Some studies have also found that parents feel closer to their children as a result of engaging in practices encouraged by reading parent newsletters [9,28].

A final set of findings related to parenting newsletter interventions addresses the *suggested benefits* of such a resource, specifically referring to why such an approach may cultivate positive outcomes with parents and caregivers. Common reasons that parents have cited for the helpfulness of newsletters include that newsletter information is reassuring to parents and increases their confidence, newsletters share new knowledge on key topics such as development or child guidance, and parents are able to apply information shared in the newsletter (health and safety practices, etc.) [55,65,66]. Similar to the five attributes identified in the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, these reasons for valuing a parenting newsletter overlap clearly with concepts including compatibility (i.e., reassuring to parents), complexity (i.e., simple to understand), and trialability (i.e., able to apply the information readily). Weigel and Martin conducted a qualitative study with parenting newsletter recipients and found four themes that seemed to undergird the effectiveness of a newsletter. The four elements were that the resource is accessible or easy to read with a reasonable amount of content, the resource is shared in a timely fashion (comes when it is needed or useful), the material is engaging and communicates well with parents, and that the information provided is accurate and high-quality [55]. The suggested benefits of newsletters are linked with particular advantages in using this process to communicate information to parents and caregivers. These identified advantages included the following: (a) information that is useful can be offered in small amounts at a critical moment (birth of a child, etc.); (b) the resource is relatively low cost with the ability to scale widely and reach a large population; (c) it may be possible to reach individuals who are more difficult to reach or more in need of support via a newsletter; (d) newsletter information can be shared and multiplied in one's social network; and (e) a newsletter resource can share valuable, research-based content to enhance parental knowledge, confidence, and skills [10,28,41,65].

6. Challenges and Future Directions for Parent Newsletter Interventions

While we have explored the history and usage of parent newsletter interventions, it is also useful to consider some of the challenges that exist in using this educational approach and some future

directions to explore. Four primary challenges relevant to the usage of parent newsletter interventions include updating and selecting content, adapting resources to fit the needs of diverse audiences, shifting to accommodate new delivery strategies, and conducting assessment to establish the value of newsletter interventions.

A primary challenge in designing useful resources for parents and caregivers is keeping them updated with content that is timely, research-based and applicable in their caregiving experience. New knowledge continues to be produced each year as research on parent and family relationships expands. For example, major developments in research over the past two decades that influence our understanding of child development and parent–child relationships include the impacts of childhood trauma on health and development, advancements in brain science during childhood, and new findings on topics ranging from infant nutrition to sleep in children [72,73]. The Diffusion of Innovations theory suggests that such new knowledge is of little benefit if it cannot be effectively translated and made applicable to individuals in their daily lives and experiences. A major challenge in parent and family education then is to review new research findings, assess their importance and utility for parents and caregivers, and selectively incorporate them into content used in parenting newsletter interventions and other resources [16,17].

A second challenge with parenting newsletter interventions is making adaptations so that such resources can fit with the particular needs and issues associated with parenting for diverse family audiences. Adjusting educational resources in parent and family education to provide a better fit with particular audiences has been identified as a core best practice in the field [12,16]. The Diffusion of Innovations Theory suggests that sometimes innovations have to undergo reinvention, or change, in the process of implementation to better suit the needs of an identified audience and maintain compatibility [19]. Varied examples of newsletter resources exist that have been adapted to meet the needs of teen parents, divorced mothers, Hispanic-language parents, and fathers or father figures [9,47,53,56,70]. Often, an established newsletter resource can be adapted to fit more specifically with an identified target audience. However, ample room also exists for new parenting newsletter interventions to be developed which address a range of audiences such as parents of children with special needs, particular caregiver populations (e.g., grandparents raising grandchildren), or families of diverse ethnic, cultural or linguistic backgrounds. In making such adjustments or developing new resources, individuals working in parent and family education must also consider preferences that may exist for receiving and using information on raising children.

A third significant challenge in thinking about parenting newsletter interventions is addressing how they fit into the landscape of parent and family education in a technological era. Research suggests that parents are evolving in how they access information on parenting and their preferences for interacting with different information sources [1,3,10,62]. Already developed and emerging information technologies have dramatically altered how information is delivered, received, and assessed by parents, with parents using information from diverse information sources including social media platforms, blogs, apps, and other technologies [1,60,62]. Such shifts may make the idea of “mailed” newsletters seem outdated, and so those furnishing such resources must decide if traditional delivery modes ought to be updated or changed. At the same time, newsletter resources can also be adapted or reinvented to changing delivery methods and made available via technologies that can also be assessed for effectiveness. Here again, the Diffusion of Innovations Theory recognizes that such adaptation or reinvention is a central element of how innovations maintain relevance across time in a changing world [19].

A final challenge to be addressed in the usage of parenting newsletter interventions is conducting assessment that allows for exploring the effectiveness of newsletter delivery and impact on parents and caregivers who receive such a resource. Parent and family education has moved into an era in which evidence-based approaches are considered to be a priority in designing and delivering programs or resources [12,14,16]. A “best practices” approach suggests that resources should be reviewed for effectiveness based on available research or else investigated further to determine whether they meet

standards of criteria for effectiveness [12]. The Diffusion of Innovations Theory argues that effectiveness is key in the usage of a resource or approach [19]. Thus, it is important to explore the degree to which parenting newsletter interventions fulfill their objectives and reach effectiveness. A limited number of studies have been conducted which are rigorous in nature and provide a clear base of evidence for the effectiveness of parenting newsletter interventions [8,10,38–41,52,67,68]. Such research ought to continue and further explore other variables that may impact newsletter effectiveness, including demographic factors, dosage, delivery method, engagement with content, social network involvement, and other potential factors.

In addition to challenges, there are important future directions to consider with regard to parenting newsletter interventions. As we move further into the 21st century, the landscape of parent and family education continues shifting based on the needs and preferences of the those involved in raising and working with children [1,7,14,62]. Additionally, while face-to-face training and group discussions remain available, virtual trainings and online support systems have grown in popularity as technology continues to advance in the “digital era” [60,62]. Some advantages of technology-based engagement are that engaging with audiences virtually makes it possible to reach a wider audience, to reach them at a time of their own convenience, and to reach them in a more cost-effective manner [7,60,62].

As noted, the methods for delivering content and engaging audiences with parent and family education continue evolving. Similarly, the approaches utilized with parenting newsletter interventions continue to shift and align with how individuals want to receive information. Information in parenting newsletters used to be delivered solely as a printed document received through an extension program, school, or health care facility. Today, such content in a parenting newsletter can be delivered via an electronic document emailed directly to an email inbox, as snippets of information frequently posted to a social media platform, app or blog, or perhaps as text messages sent directly to a smartphone [62]. As the “digital era” moves into the future, non-print versions of content are likely to grow in popularity and diversify in multiple ways. For example, such content could reasonably be packaged in a short, conversational video that comes directly to a parent’s email inbox or perhaps could be shared in a regular podcast series. Such resources are likely to be less expensive to produce and require less labor to distribute to a large mailing list. If parent newsletter interventions trend toward digital versions it is likely to allow for more rapid dissemination, the timely sharing of new research information, and the opportunity to deliver content more frequently or precisely [3,62].

In looking to the future of parenting newsletter interventions, additional systematic research is needed to investigate their effectiveness and to understand how such resources can be adapted for the benefit of specific target populations. A few studies have examined the impact of newsletter interventions on more diverse audiences such as low-income parents, ethnic minorities, or fathers and father figures [9,47,53,56,70]. However, substantial opportunities exist to explore the utility of parenting newsletter interventions for diverse populations across the world and with differing family contexts [9,10,41,50,52,61]. Another area of research that remains to be examined carefully is the impact of using parenting newsletter interventions in combination with other approaches, such as with online learning modules for parents or in association with parenting apps. Currently, little to no research is available in this area. For example, does blending a parenting newsletter with a set of parenting videos or an online learning module or a specific parenting app make it more impactful? In addition, further research on the specific features of newsletters or other factors such as the dosage of newsletters received by parents deserve specific attention. Overall, additional research is needed to dive deeper into the usage, utility, practical value, and application of parenting newsletters. Such examination could involve differentiation between printed newsletters and those that are distributed electronically, as well as assessing both short-term and longer-term outcomes to understand impacts of newsletter interventions over time. To frame such developments, we have applied Rogers’ Diffusion of Innovations Theory to illustrate its potential as a promising framework for understanding and explaining the evolution of parenting newsletters. These possibilities for future research argue in favor

of the continuation of parenting newsletter interventions and conducting specific evaluation efforts in this specific arena of parent and family education.

7. Conclusions

Despite the existence of newsletters as a resource in parent and family education for over 70 years, there has been limited attention to their unique role as a tool for education and their history and usage. Thus, we suggest that this overview article on the topic contributes to our understanding in several unique ways.

First, we introduce the Diffusion of Innovations Theory [19] as an explanatory framework to aid in understanding the adoption and expansion of newsletters as a tool in the landscape of parent and family education [19]. Additionally, despite a variety of studies, this article is the first to furnish an overview of the broad history and usage of parenting newsletters in family life education across a breadth of contexts, such as pediatrics, extension and other settings. Additionally, this article is unique in providing a brief but integrated summary of key research areas and findings related to the usage and impacts of parenting newsletters. A final contribution is placing this topic in the broad context of prevention science and articulating future directions for parenting newsletters as we consider the changing landscape of parent and family education.

For the scientific community, we contend this article is useful in providing a broad contextual understanding, familiarity with the available literature, and orientation to topics of research on parenting newsletters. Review of this material can help scholars and others to more quickly grasp the contextual background in which newsletters are used and the settings for their usage in public health, education or related areas. Furthermore, it can assist those interested in rapidly becoming familiar with the available scientific literature on parenting newsletters, which is largely encompassed in this overview of the topic. The review of selected key findings from research on the topic also integrates the disparate subjects studied in relation to parenting newsletters and provides a backdrop for further investigation. While the intent of this article was not to systematically review the effectiveness of parenting newsletters across all variables previously studied on this topic, we hope that our brief but integrated summary of key research findings can supply a meaningful understanding of this topic.

For the educational community, this article highlights newsletters as a useful tool in the arsenal of parent and family education while also projecting how they may factor into the future. Educators and community professionals can benefit from understanding the context and history of newsletter usage, factors associated with their adoption and implementation, and ways to assess their value. Further, they may appropriately consider whether parenting newsletters may be of use in reaching a particular audience, combining with another educational approach or delivering via a new technology.

The work of raising children will continue in the future and parents and caregivers will inevitably continue seeking sources of information to aid them in increasing understanding and developing caregiving skills. Parent and family education will also face the task of meeting such needs and disseminating knowledge in effective and impactful ways. The topic of raising children is timeless. However, new resources and approaches for educating parents and caregivers will continue to evolve in the future. Parenting newsletter interventions represent one targeted type of educational resource that have an interesting history of usage and influence in the field of parent and family education. They also hold great promise for meeting the ongoing challenges in parent and family education and developing in new and innovative ways to meet the needs of families in the 21st century.

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