

Using An Evidence-Based Prevention Program to Develop Strong Youth and Families

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Introduction

In my twenty years as a community educator for a school district in western Washington one of my greatest privileges was to serve as a liaison between families and community resources. It was apparent that parents wanted their children to be successful and school leaders wanted parents to be involved with their youth's education. However, at upper elementary and middle/junior high school a pattern of declining parental involvement was observed – often because parents were following developmental cues from their young adolescents.

Fast forward to my current position as an associate professor with Washington State University Extension. I am tasked with disseminating a science-based, best practice family education program – *Strengthening Families* (SFP), for youth ages 10-14 and their parents/caregivers. The program is designed to prevent youth drug and alcohol abuse and other problem behaviors, but improvement in family rules, harmony, and communication are also measurably achieved.

The Need

Engaging parents/caregivers actively with their youth in the late elementary and middle school years has been shown to reduce the risk of adolescent substance use and other problem behaviors. Studies have verified that a program where parents/caregivers and youth learn together is most effective in long-term behavior change and reducing risk. Early use/abuse of drugs and alcohol is a predictor of future use/abuse. An evaluation report of Washington's Prevention and Intervention Services programs conducted for the Superintendent of Public Instruction recommended utilizing science-based programs to reduce teen substance abuse. *Strengthening Families (10-14)* is well researched and science based, making it eligible for local and state prevention funding.

A large body of evidence confirms that the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is "not income or social status, but the extent to which that student's family is able to create a home environment that encourages learning; expresses high expectations for their children's achievement and future careers; and becomes involved in their children's education at school and in the community." The *Strengthening Families (10-14)* curriculum includes discussion and activities that model positive futures orientation – concepts that help families support their student's goals and dreams and promote positive youth development.

Youth development opportunities for many young adolescents occur within the prescribed framework of daily student classes, clubs, field trips, volunteer opportunities and athletics, yet families are the original and most enduring influence on youth. Since programs that strengthen families are not typically funded within school budgets, resources must be obtained outside the school system. My new role as extension faculty began to feel very familiar; seeking external funding to create and sustain programming.

Program Description

Strengthening Families (10-14) was developed by Virginia Molgaard at Iowa State University. It was adopted in 1999 by Washington State University to fill an identified gap in preparing parents/caregivers, preadolescents and young adolescents for the teen years. The program runs for seven weeks, but in Washington State we add an eighth week to allow time for orientation and filling out pre-program surveys.

Each evening families gather for approximately two and a half hours. In the first half hour dinner is served. Next, youth attend a one-hour program while their parents/caregivers attend a different one-hour program. In the last hour families gather together to have fun and focus on prescribed topics. The following subjects are introduced through DVD presentations, discussion, fun activities, and games:

Parents

Using love and limits

Youth

Having goals and dreams

Families

Supporting goals/dreams

Encouraging good behavior	Appreciating parents	Appreciating family members
Building bridges	Dealing with stress	Understanding family values
Making House Rules	Handling peer pressure	Using family meetings
Protecting against substance abuse	Following house rules	Building family communication
	Reaching out to others	Reaching family goals

Strengthening Families (10-14) was longitudinally researched in Iowa. Students were followed from the time they originally participated in the program, 6th grade through 12th grade. Positive outcomes from the research resulted in the program becoming nationally recognized by the US Department of Education, Center for Prevention of Substance Abuse, and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. In Washington State Dr. Laura Griner Hill has been conducting pre- and post program evaluations of SFP since 2002. To date more than 2000 families have participated in WSU’s evaluation project. To view a video of Dr. Hill’s research, go to <http://sfp.wsu.edu/ForTrainers.htm>. Click on “Presenting Research Findings at a Training.”

Implementation

In Washington State we recommend utilizing four (4) certified SFP facilitators, one (1) site coordinator, SFP curriculum and supplies, dinner each night for eight (8) weeks, child care, three meeting areas, participant recruitment and pre- and post- program evaluation. The approximate average cost of a program that serves 7 to 12 families is \$6,500. While these requirements may seem daunting, funding is made available to local communities through Washington State’s Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse (DASA) and Community Trade and Economic Development (CTED). Access to local funding is generally available to organizers who collaborate with municipal or county agencies that receive funds from the state.

Washington State University supports statewide SFP programs by conducting trainings that certify SFP facilitators, providing technical assistance on a statewide website (<http://sfp.wsu.edu>), convening a statewide interagency team, gathering SFP facilitators to network and share ideas,

and providing pre- and post-program evaluation feedback to communities. Evaluation results are prized by SFP organizers who rely on them to assure continued local funding. WSU staff translated the curriculum binder material into Spanish, creating “Fortaleciendo Familias” for Latino and other Spanish speaking populations. Source and pricing information for curriculum materials is available on the WSU statewide website.

In typical community education fashion, many sites reduce the costs of SFP by “braiding” their resources. In Kitsap County recently a program received meals each week from the Suquamish Clearwater Tribal Casino, paid child care workers out of Title I funds, employed a Western Washington University intern as the site coordinator, and used supplies provided by the Children’s Trust through Kitsap Community Resources. Most programs are sited in school buildings in the evening.

In some communities a \$35 registration fee per family is requested, scholarships are available. In other communities grants fund the program and no fees are charged to families. The retention rate (attendance at five or more of the seven sessions) for families is 85% across the state, which is higher than many community-based programs.

Recruitment and reminders appear to be the most effective methods of retaining families over the multi-week program. School counselors, family advocates, security staff, teachers, other staff and administrators are encouraged to suggest families who can benefit from SFP. A person who is known and trusted by families, and is familiar to the school serves as site coordinator and issues personal invitations to families. Flyers are also distributed throughout age-appropriate grades and the program is promoted on school district websites. Once the program is underway the site coordinator phones families weekly to thank them for attending and reminds them of the next meeting. I can attest to the effectiveness of these reminders as I see families return faithfully each week. In one Washington school district, organizers are using the *Strengthening Families (10-14)* program to ease the transition for students and families between elementary and middle school. Students who have “graduated” from the program return to their elementary school to

visit 5th graders and encourage them to participate with their families.

Research Findings

An international meta-analysis of over 56 prevention programs found *only* SFP provided convincing evidence of long-term effectiveness in preventing adolescent substance use and abuse. In a “structural equation modeling approach, significant effects of the Iowa SFP were found on proximal intervention outcomes, intermediate school engagement, and the academic success of high school seniors.” (Spath, Randall, Shin, 2008) In Washington State “a majority of adults reported positive change from before to after the program on nearly all measures of risk and protective factors. The Total score of targeted intervention parent behaviors showed significant positive change. In the original research trials, change in this parent scale was associated with long-term decreases in adolescent substance use.” (Hill, 2008) Further evidence of the program’s effectiveness is that the positive changes are consistent across ethnicities, language and culture in Washington State.

In terms of economic benefit, for every dollar invested in *Strengthening Families* there is a return of \$9.60 (Spath, Gyll, Day). The net benefit per youth is \$5923. This figure represents costs saved from lost wages, lower productivity, medical care, and other costs associated with alcohol disorders. A more recent study, which calculated benefits in terms of criminal justice costs related to alcohol abuse such as prevented arrest, incarceration, adjudication, victims’ costs, future earnings, tax revenue and decreased public assistance, estimated a benefit per family of \$6541. (Pennsylvania State University, Prevention Research Center). Ironically, the approximate net benefit for one family is approximately the same as the cost of funding a program for 7 to 12 families. We calculate that the WSU Extension-led program, which has analyzed data for more than 1800 families, has provided an estimated benefit of nearly \$12 million for Washington State to date.

Conclusion

Strengthening Families(10-14) fits well with many practices of community education:

meeting community needs in local school buildings after hours, using multiple resources efficiently, providing lifelong education in a intergenerational setting, and including diverse populations. Perhaps the best example of the transformational nature of *Strengthening Families (10-14)* is the certification of a local parent as an SFP facilitator. When her family completed the program two years ago, she said “This is the first time that my husband and I have been on the same page about raising our young teen.” She now facilitates a program in her school and her son volunteers as a child care provider.

References

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