

## **Family Living Programs**

### **The Strengthening Families Program: Building Statewide Capacity**

#### **Situation**

Wisconsin families struggle to manage busy schedules and find effective ways to communicate and stay involved in their kids' lives. Research shows that protective parenting and strong relationships between parents and youth can steer youth away from dangerous behaviors like juvenile delinquency and underage alcohol and drug use.

In 2006, there were over 109,000 total juvenile arrests in Wisconsin. From 1996 to 2006, there were increases in juvenile arrests for offenses related to operating while intoxicated (OWI) and drug laws (WI Office of Justice Assistance). In 2007, high school students reported that nearly one-half of all students drank alcohol in the past 30 days and their marijuana use increased significantly from 11% in 1993 to 20% in 2007 (Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey, WI Department of Public Instruction).

Across Wisconsin, significant resources are invested in prevention programs to halt these negative behaviors. All too often these programs are unable to show positive outcomes, are ineffective, or worse, have a negative impact on the youth. Yet, there are a number of model prevention programs that are evidence-based and show positive results. The Strengthening Families Program for Parents and Youth 10-14 (SFP 10-14) has been scientifically evaluated and shown to be effective in positive outcomes for both youth and their parents. SFP 10-14 is a family skill-building program designed to prevent teen substance abuse and other behavior problems, strengthen parenting skills and build family strengths. Not only does the program have evidence that it works, it is cost effective. However, in order to conduct the program, communities across the state need training, material costs and technical assistance.

#### **Response**

UW-Extension Family Living Programs has provided leadership in bringing the Strengthening Families Program for Parents and Youth 10-14 to Wisconsin families. Since 2001, UW-Extension has organized fifteen facilitator trainings in which over 70 Extension county colleagues and over 220 local partners have been trained. These trained facilitators teach the program locally and work with parents, caregivers and youth in their own communities. Over 60% of Wisconsin counties now have local facilitators to teach SFP 10-14. Building this kind of capacity in Wisconsin has also resulted in greater efficiency and reduced cost, as ten Extension educators are now official trainers of the program and it is no longer necessary to pay out of state trainers.

Laying a foundation for SFP 10-14 in Wisconsin, the Hmong Family Strengthening Project was piloted in the Eau Claire community in 2000. Hmong families in Wisconsin struggle to preserve their cultural identity within mainstream society. This difficult transition into American culture is often cited as a reason for increasing rates of substance abuse, school alienation and violence among Hmong youth. As a result of the program, Hmong families gained skills in communication, support, setting limits and family rules, thus reducing the risks associated with youth substance use and delinquency.

#### **Outcomes**

Compiled statewide evaluation results reveal that as a result of the program, nearly 9 of 10 parents believe their relationship with their child has improved and that they are more likely to deal with problems with their child in a calm manner. The vast majority of parents (95%) also report being more likely to monitor their

children and being better able to talk with their child about rules. Among youth, over 75% report they better understand family rules about drinking and drugs and the consequences if a rule is broken. Nine of ten youth agree that they now know ways to keep from being pushed by friends to do things that might get them in trouble.

Youth value the program as evidenced by what they say:

*"I learned that my parents are fun to be with."*

*"I learned to respect my parents and realize money doesn't grow on trees."*

*"I learned what to say if someone is trying to get you in trouble."*

*"I didn't realize how much my mom cared about me."*

The Hmong Family Strengthening Program demonstrated positive results as well. Hmong parents reported that family conflict decreased significantly, and they expressed affection and warmth towards their children more often. Hmong youth reported that parents monitored them more and expressed more praise, and there was less family conflict. Youth also reported that their parents now have stricter attitudes about drug use, set clearer family rules and are more likely to enforce them. This program has raised awareness of the special challenges of parenting between two cultures and provides a positive model for other immigrant groups.

Research has shown that youth are positively influenced for years after they complete the program. Even six years later, youth who complete the program are less likely to binge drink and practice other destructive behaviors than their peers who didn't participate in the program.

As the SFP 10-14 grows, Wisconsin youth and their families will likely benefit as have hundreds of other families nationwide. National evaluations of the program have found that youth who participated were less likely to use alcohol and other drugs (including methamphetamine), were less aggressive, had fewer conduct problems, and resisted peer pressure better than youth in a control group. Parents/caregivers who participated in the program were more affectionate and set more appropriate limits for their children.

The Strengthening Families Project was awarded a 2007 Chancellor's Award for Outstanding Achievement. This was one of only two such awards within Cooperative Extension. The award was cited as making exceptional contributions to the quality of residents' lives in the state.

Cost benefits analysis shows that for every \$1 invested in the program, nearly \$10 is saved in future costs such as drug treatment, lost future earnings and time in the juvenile justice system. What began as a 1-county pilot project in 2000, has grown to a 40+ county statewide initiative that has reached hundreds of families and resulted in hundreds of dollars in long-term savings for taxpayers.

## **Contact**

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