

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 2004, there were over 113,000 total juvenile arrests in Wisconsin. From 1994 to 2004, there were increases in juvenile arrests for offenses related to liquor laws, disorderly conduct and drug laws (WI Office of Justice Assistance). In 2005, 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 16% in 2005 (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 participating. Yet, there are a number of model prevention programs that are evidence-based and showing 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 other resources.

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 nine facilitator trainings for the SFP 10-14 in which over 40 Extension county colleagues and over 100 local partners have been trained. These trainers work with parents, caregivers and youth in their own communities. Building this kind of capacity in Wisconsin has also resulted in greater efficiency and reduced cost, as it is no longer necessary to pay to bring official trainers from out of state.

Laying a foundation for SFP 10-14 in Wisconsin, the Hmong Family Strengthening Project was piloted in the Eau Claire Hmong 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 have gained skills in communication, support, setting limits and family rules, thus reducing the risks associated with youth substance use and delinquency.

Outcomes

UW-Extension is providing SFP 10-14 facilitators to Wisconsin communities; they, in turn, are training community members. Six UW-Extension educators have achieved official trainer status for SFP 10-14 and meet regularly as a work team with three focus areas: statewide capacity building, marketing and promotion, and evaluation. Family Living staff have developed web sites and a listserve to enhance communication between all Extension facilitators. Currently, discussions focus on training and adaptations for Native American cultures, an online database to track evaluation data and program implementation statistics.

The Hmong Family Strengthening Program demonstrated that national results can be expected as SFP 10-14 is implemented across Wisconsin. This program has also raised awareness of the special challenges of parenting between two cultures and provides a positive model for other immigrant groups. 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.

As the SFP 10-14 expands, Wisconsin youth and their families will likely benefit as have hundreds of other families nationwide. National evaluations of the SFP10-14 have found that youth who participated were less likely to use alcohol and other drugs, 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 program has also been studied in terms of cost effectiveness; for every \$1.00 invested in the program, \$9.60 is saved in future costs such as drug treatment, lost future earnings, and time in the juvenile justice system. This is a high economic return.

In addition, research has shown that youth are positively influenced for years after they have completed the program. Youth put the immeasurable value of the program into words:

"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."

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