

REPORT OF FINDINGS SURVEY OF PARTICIPANTS IN FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAMS

PURPOSE

Program logic model The Family Support Program (FSP), as conducted by affiliates of Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance (PFSA), has as its main objective the prevention of child abuse by enhancing parenting skills of program participants and helping them to manage emotional stress and handle common parenting problems without violence and abuse. Ideally, participants in the program achieve an increased understanding of positive parenting skills, including ways to handle stress and problem situations in a non-abusive manner. A second outcome of participation is an increased social support network for participants, which offers positive role models and reinforcement of positive parenting strategies. The process (or means leading to these outcomes) is the participation in an FSP, which consists of sharing parenting experiences among participants, who support each other under the guidance of a professional facilitator. The atmosphere at weekly meetings is non-threatening and non-judgmental, and confidentiality is respected. Many groups offer concurrent programs for children, child care, meals or snacks and a variety of special events such as speakers, videos, field trips and social events.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling FSPs are anonymous and ongoing. Because of this attendance by any one family may be irregular, and the particular parents attending any given meeting may vary. The total size of population of the FSP participants is not known; therefore, we could not employ probability sampling. Instead, we asked all affiliated program coordinators to distribute survey instruments to group participants during regular meetings in January and February 2009.

The survey instrument The survey instrument consisted of a paper-and-pencil questionnaire containing 35 questions. The questions have been adapted from questionnaires used by the agency for program evaluation purposes since 1996.

The questions were grouped into four themes: (1) impact of the FSA program on the participants (8 questions); (2) participant attitudes toward various elements of the meetings (5 questions); (3) reasons for participating in FSA program (9 questions); and (4) causes of stress in participants' families (11 questions). The responses to all questions in the four themes were measured on a five-point intensity scale ranging from low (0) to high (4). In this report, we combined the received responses into a three-level intensity scale by combining two low-end and two high-end levels.

In addition to the yes/no questions, we used an open-ended question in which the participants were asked to answer in a brief narrative form to assess the most valuable impact of the program on their lives.

In summary, our survey instrument was designed to answer the following questions:

- What is the impact of participation in the FSP on its participants?
- What aspects of the FSP are most appealing to participants?
- What life situations cause the most stress in participant families?
- What was the main reason that the participant first came to the FSP?

Data collection The survey was conducted in January and February 2009. The total number of collected responses was 348. We estimate that this number represents about 25% percent of the population served by the FSA programs statewide at the time when the survey was taken. The completed surveys were collected from 21 different organizations in 20 Pennsylvania counties.

RESULTS

Demographics We extracted demographic information for those affiliates who returned parent surveys from the quarterly statistics submitted to PFSA, in order to keep the length of the survey instrument reasonable for parents to complete. The participants were mostly women (84%); the groups are racially and ethnically diverse (72% are white, 24% are African-American and 4% are Hispanic, Asian or other races). All of the groups responding to this survey use English as the primary language.

Participant Responses Several questions were directed at finding out the impact the FSP has on the parenting behavior of participants, including the extent to which the parent learns new ways to discipline children, degree to which techniques for controlling the parents' emotions and stress are learned, acquisition of skills needed to reunify a family when children are placed out of the home, and knowledge of access to resources in the community. **In general, 64% of program participants reported gaining much or very much information to improve their parenting as a result of attending the FSP.** The most important impact on participants came by way of learning new ways to discipline children, with 64% of parents reporting significant amounts of learning in this area; 55% reported learning a lot about available resources, and 59% learned about ways to control emotions. Sixty-eight percent of participants credited their experience with the program with helping them reunify their families.

In addition, we asked several questions concerning the amount of support from other parents, and from the staff, that was received by the parents. **A large percentage of participants (85%) found the facilitator of the program provided extensive support and information;** 64% felt they had made friends with other participants and 59% reported that they had found support from other parents in the program.

One overwhelmingly positive response in this survey is that all of the participants answering the question, "Would you recommend this program to other parents?" responded "yes" and **almost all (98%) reported having a better relationship with their children and other family members because of their participation in the FSP.**

The qualities of the FSP that are important to families were also examined in the survey. Child care and food are offered during meetings by the majority of PFSA affiliates; **the availability of both child care and food during meetings are important to program**

participants, but child care is especially important. Specifically, 61% of parents report child care as being important to their attendance at meetings, while the provision of food during meeting times is important to 41% of parents surveyed. Many FSPs offer written materials on a variety of parenting topics during meetings; these are important to 69% of participants. A smaller percentage (49%) view speakers and videos during meetings as an important component. Finally, half of the parents view the group members' ability to determine the agenda for the meeting as an important part of the group experience. The groups represented in the survey meet in domestic violence programs, county prisons, schools, religious institutions and community centers such as Family Centers.

Another area of assessment is the reasons given by participants for attending the FSP. **Three reasons for attending the program are almost universal – to receive social support (59% of parents list this as a reason), to learn parenting skills (73%) and to get help with stress (59%).** Finding out about other programs is given as a reason by almost half of participants, with other reasons, such as complying with a court order to attend (26%), stopping abusive behavior (15%) and stopping neglectful behavior (18%), listed by fewer parents.

When asked to identify sources of stress in their families, **financial concerns loom large for most families.** Forty-seven percent of participants identified “concerns about money” as their most pressing stressors, and 27% of participants faced problems with unemployment. Problems with family interaction (24%), legal problems (26%), children’s behavior (26%), physical health concerns (23%), mental health concerns (25%) and housing problems (29%) were also stressors for many participants; fewer numbers of participants are stressed by family violence or alcohol/drug abuse.

IMPLICATIONS

This survey has at least three implications for PFSA and its affiliates. First, it creates a snapshot of the issues facing participant families and provides insight into the needs of the families. Knowing what participants identify as family needs challenges the FSP to design the program in such a way as to assist in meeting these needs. Similar implications are created from the survey responses about the FSP meeting itself. Increasing numbers of parents see the provision of written materials at meetings as important, challenging PFSA and its affiliates to continue to create relevant parent education materials and curricula.

Second, the survey demonstrates the importance of the group facilitator as a key figure in providing helpful information and support to families. The continuing education and mentoring of staff who work with families continues to be a priority in planning seminars, workshops and other training opportunities for PFSA affiliate staff.

Finally, the most important implication of the survey, concerns the effectiveness of the FSP. The majority of participants report that they have become better parents because of the program, and all the participants would recommend such a program to other parents. Because of the ongoing nature of the FSP, parents can receive nonjudgmental support and education whenever they need it and can provide support to other struggling parents as

they continue to attend the program. In a climate of decreased funding for prevention, FSPs provide a low-cost, high-impact service to families. Development of the PFSA network to include more programs is an important part of child abuse prevention in Pennsylvania.

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