

PENNSYLVANIA FAMILY SUPPORT ALLIANCE

REPORT OF FINDINGS

Survey of Participants in Family Support Programs

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PURPOSE

Program logic model The main objective of the Family Support Program (FSP), as conducted by affiliates of the Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance (PFSA), is to prevent child abuse by enhancing parenting skills of program participants, and helping them to manage emotional stress and handle common parenting problems appropriately. Thus, the ideal outcome of participation in the program is 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 safe people with whom to discuss parenting concerns. The process (or means leading to these outcomes) is the participation in a Family Support Program, whose activities consist 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.



METHODOLOGY

Sampling Because of the anonymous and ongoing nature of Family Support Programs, and irregular attendance patterns, the total size of population of the FSP participants is not known. Therefore, we could not employ probability sampling. Instead, we asked all affiliated programs to distribute survey instruments to group participants during regular meetings in November and December 2005.

The survey instrument The survey instrument consists of a paper-and-pencil questionnaire containing thirty-nine 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 (nine questions); (2) participant attitudes toward various elements of the meetings (five questions); (3) reasons for participating in FSA program (nine questions); and (4) causes of stress in participants' families (ten questions). The responses to all questions in the four themes are measured on a five-point intensity scale ranging from low (0) to high (4). For the purpose of reporting simplicity we combined the received responses into a three-level intensity scale by combining two low-end and two high-end levels.



In addition, we used two yes/no questions, and two open-ended questions in which the participants were asked to answer in a brief narrative form to elicit overall attitudes toward the FSA program. There was also one open-ended question in the impact theme and one similar question in the reasons theme.

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

- What is the impact of participation in the Family Support Program on its participants?
- What aspects of the Family Support Program 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 Family Support Program?

Data collection The survey was conducted in November and December 2005. The total number of collected responses is 227. We estimate that this number represents about 25% 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 18 Pennsylvania counties.

RESULTS

Demographics Because of concerns about the length of the survey, we decided not to survey participant demographics in this instrument. Instead, we extracted demographic information for those affiliates who sent in parent surveys from the quarterly statistics submitted by affiliated organizations. The participants are mostly women (85%); the groups are racially and ethnically diverse (73% are white, 20% are African-American and 7% are Hispanic, Asian or other races). All of the groups responding to this survey use English as the primary language.

Participant Responses A number of questions were directed at finding out how much impact the Family Support Program has on the parenting behavior of participants. This includes the extent to which the parent learns new ways to discipline children, techniques for controlling the parents' emotions and stress, skills needed to reunify a family when children are placed out of the home, and access to resources in the community. **In general, 70% of program participants reported gaining much information to improve their parenting as a result of attending the Family Support Program.** The most important impact on participants came by way of learning new ways to discipline children, with 71% of parents reporting significant amounts of learning in this area; 69% reported learning a lot about available resources, and 67% learned about ways to control emotions. Sixty 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. **Almost all participants (89%) found the facilitator of the program to provide extensive support and information; 72% felt they had made friends with other participants and 66% reported that they had found support from other parents in the program.** For more information about impacts reported on our survey, see Table 1, "Reported Impact of FSP on Parents."

One overwhelmingly positive response in this survey is that all of the participants would recommend the program to other parents and

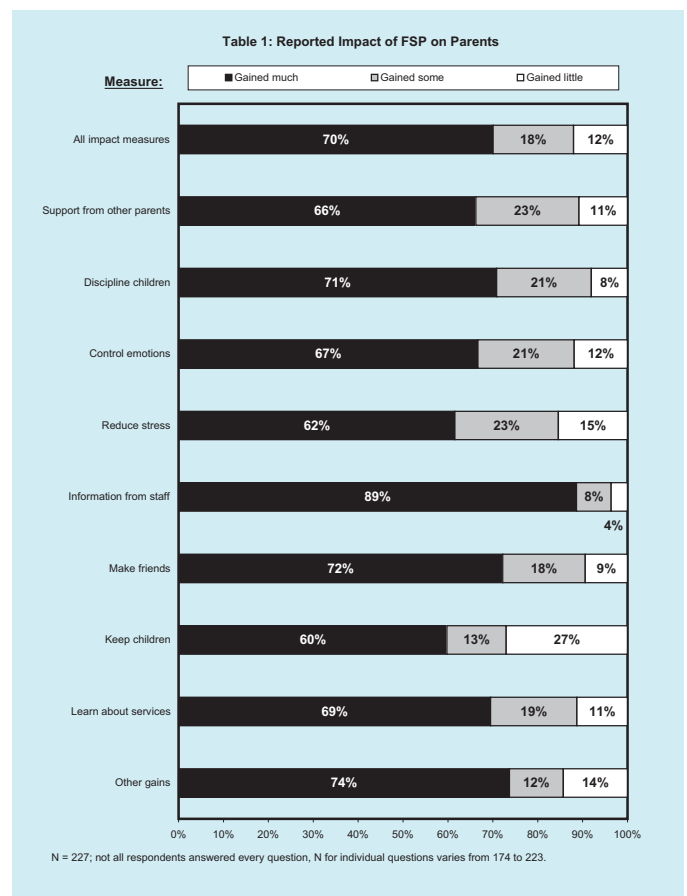
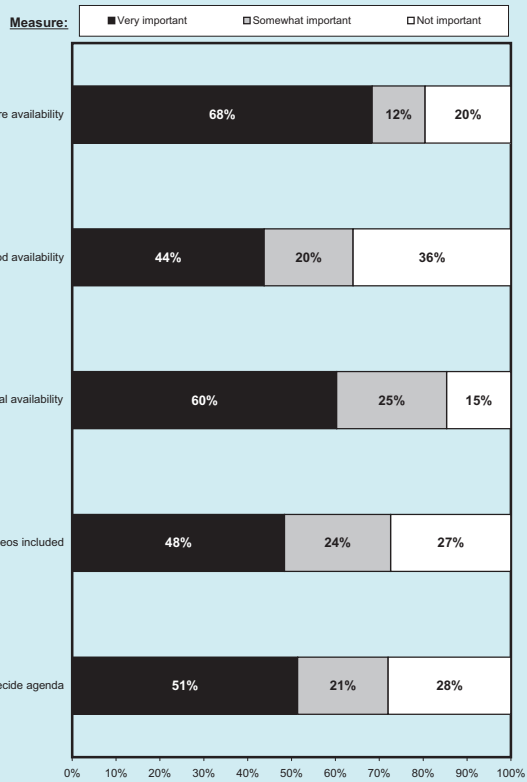


Table 2: Reported Participant Attitudes Toward FSP Meetings



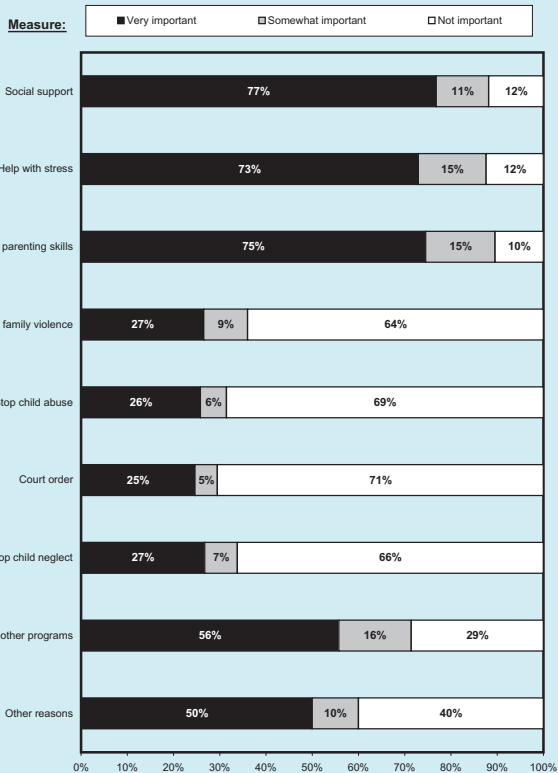
N = 227; not all respondents answered every question, N for individual questions varies from 215 to 219.

almost all (97%) reported having a better relationship with their children and other family members because of their participation in the Family Support Program.

Another area of assessment was the qualities of the Family Support Program that are important to families. Childcare and food are offered during meetings by the majority of PFSA affiliates; **both childcare and food are important to program participants, but child care is especially important.** Specifically, 68% of parents report child care as being important to their attendance at meetings, while the provision of food during meeting times is important to 44% of parents surveyed. Many FSPs offer written materials on a variety of parenting topics during meetings; these are important to 60% of participants. A smaller percentage (48%) view speakers and videos during meetings as an important component. Finally, more than half of the parents view the group members’ ability to determine the agenda for the meeting as an important part of the group experience. Table 2, “Reported Participant Attitudes Toward FSP Meetings,” gives more information about these questions.

The reasons given by participants for attending the Family Support Program are detailed in Table 3, “Reported Reasons for FSP Meeting Attendance.” **Three reasons for attending the program are almost universal – to receive social support, to learn parenting skills and to get help with stress.** These reasons are reported by approximately three-quarters of participants. Finding out about other programs is given as a reason by over half of participants, with other reasons, such as complying with a court order to attend, listed by only a few parents. The groups represented in the survey meet in domestic violence programs, county prisons, schools, religious institutions and community centers such as Family Centers.

Table 3: Reported Reasons of FSP Meeting Attendance



N = 227; not all respondents answered every question, N for individual questions varies from 207 to 220, and 100 for “Other reasons.”

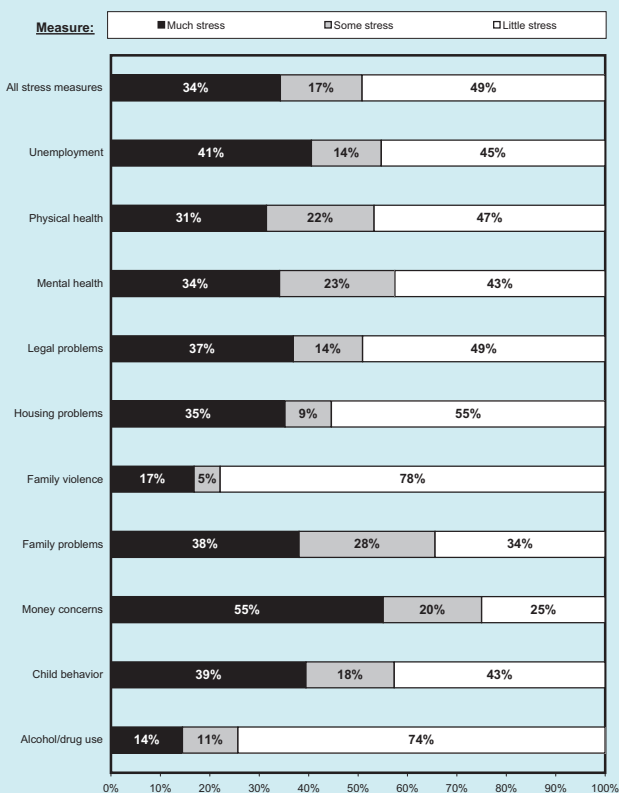
When asked to identify sources of stress in their families, **financial concerns loom large for most families.** Fifty-five percent of participants identified “concerns about money” as their most pressing stressors, closely followed by “unemployment” for 41% of participants. Children’s behavior, legal problems, housing problems, family problems and health concerns were stressors for approximately one-third of participants; fewer numbers of participants are stressed by family violence or alcohol/drug abuse. See Table 4, “Reported Causes of Stress in FSP Participants.”

IMPLICATIONS

This survey has several implications for Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance and its affiliated agencies. First, it creates a snapshot of the issues facing participant families, and provides insight into the needs of the families. For example, if financial difficulties are the primary stressor of the families, and many parents attend the group as a way to learn new techniques for handling stress, the FSP must devise ways to help the families with the specific stress caused by that lack of money. Further, because the majority of participants see the facilitator as a key figure in providing helpful information and support, training and resources for staff working with families, particularly on the effects of stress on family life, may be a priority for the Family Support network.



Table 4: Reported Causes of Stress in FSP Participants



N = 227; not all respondents answered every question, N for individual questions varies from 208 to 218.

Another implication of this survey is the feedback it provides on the FSP itself, and what is important to the families who attend. It seems obvious that most parents see child care during meeting times as an important offering of the local program, but almost as many parents consider written materials to be important. So, one implication for PFSA is to face the challenge that ongoing needs for written resources for parents who attend meetings creates. Likewise, because over half of the parents see the self-determination of the group as an important component of the program, training for both staff and parents on how best to empower parents to decide the program's direction may be considered valuable.

The most important implication of the survey, however, has to do with the effectiveness of the Family Support Program. The majority of participants feel they have become better parents because of the program, and all the participants would recommend such a program to other parents; the need for more Family Support Programs throughout the state is clear. How to expand the network of community-based, parent-led/professionally facilitated programs in a climate of limited financial resources? This is the call to action issued by this survey's participants.



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