Examining Family Involvement and Youth Outcomes in the Boys Town Family Home Program

Family contact is important for the health and well-being of youth in out-of-home care; however, relatively little research has been conducted in this area. For example, research suggests that increased family contact is related to improved academic performance and better post-discharge placement permanency. While these measures of program performance are good, they do not directly measure maintenance of treatment effects after discharge such as positive discharge from out-of-home care and follow-up success.

Research on the benefits of family involvement also has been complicated by the possibility that not all types of family involvement are equally beneficial. For instance, some research has found that face-to-face visits are better predictors of positive outcomes for youth than telephone calls, while other studies have found no such difference.

In summary, there is some promising evidence that family involvement is related to positive outcomes for youth in out-of-home care, but many questions remain about this relationship. This article describes a recent study that examined the impact of family involvement on youth outcomes in the Boys Town Family Home Program.

**The Study**

This study examined clinical records for 350 youth who had been admitted to the Boys Town Family Home Program in Nebraska or one of Boys Town’s affiliate sites between July 2009 and October 2011. Researchers reviewed youth files and coded details about family and friend contacts with youth that had been recorded in the National Database (NDB), which ultimately involved gathering information from 14,323 contact records.

We were interested in learning more about what aspects of family involvement predict youth outcomes, thus we identified for analysis two predictor variables: face-to-face and telephone contact, and three outcome measures: disruptive behavior, departure success, and follow-up success.

**Predictor Variables**

Face-to-face contacts. These contacts were split into 1) all visits family or friends made to the Family Home Program, or 2) home visits. Program visits included any family or friend visit to the program, court appearances, treatment team meetings, family therapy, etc. Home visits were instances where a youth stayed with a family member or relative and which involved sleeping over at least one night.

Phone contacts. These contacts were divided into two types: 1) phone calls with family relative that occurred on Monday through Thursday, or 2) calls that occurred on Friday through Sunday. A total count of the occurrence of each contact type was computed and then divided by the youth’s length of stay to control for youth who may have more...

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Engaging Families in the Family Home Program: A Family-Teacher’s Perspective

Family-Teachers have an important role in keeping families engaged with their children while providing the structure and time to help the families be successful during their time together.

We interviewed Scott Kavanaugh to learn more about how Family-Teachers structure youth contact with their families and integrate engagement into the program.

What are the guidelines for family telephone contact with the youth?

We encourage family telephone contact with the youth on a regular basis and we have contact with the family throughout the week via emails and telephone calls to let them know how their child is doing. These contacts help us to encourage and coach families how to handle issues that may arise during their phone conversations. Most youth telephone calls with their families last anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes. Afterwards we follow up with the family to see if there are any questions or concerns.

What are the guidelines for a home campus visit to a youth by their family?

Family members are encouraged to visit their youth on home campus, which allows us to get to know the family better and it allows the family to see how they interact with the other youth in our home. This helps the family begin to learn how the Family Home Program works and in turn gives us an opportunity to observe family interactions so we can set some goals for future visits. After a couple of home campus visits, the family usually has the opportunity to start off campus visits if the interactions in the home are going well. We try to set up visits 1 to 3 times a month, depending on the family and child’s needs. We also encourage families to attend all of their child’s events on home campus such as sporting events, plays, and awards ceremonies. This helps the families feel like they are a part of their child’s life here at Boys Town.

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Examining Family Involvement (cont’d)

contacts due to spending a longer amount of time in the program.

Outcome Measures

Disruptive behavior. Forty in-program disruptive and problem behaviors that are reported upon on a daily basis were combined to create an overall measure of disruptive behavior. The total sum of these behaviors that occurred in the last two weeks in the program was used as an indicator of departing disruptive behavior. Lower scores are better for this measure.

Departure success. Four measures entered into the NDB at the time of departure were used as the indicator for departure success. The measures were departure reason (favorable/unfavorable), percent of youth treatment goals met, percent of family treatment goals met, and whether the youth departed to a more or less restrictive setting (for example, home or independent living would be a less restrictive setting). Higher scores are better for this measure.

Follow-up success. Information from six-month follow-up surveys was used for this measure. Items included the youth’s current living environment, number of subsequent out-of-home placements, whether the youth is in school and/or working, youth involvement in illegal activities, and quality of relationships with family and friends. Higher scores are better for this measure.

Results & Conclusion

While the results of this study support the importance of family contact, we found that not all family/friend contacts are equally beneficial and that some may even undermine a youth’s progress (see table). Interestingly, findings indicated that a greater number of home visits with an overnight stay was predictive of positive outcomes (see a. in table). Surprisingly, the number of family/friend visits to the residential program was not related to outcomes (see b. in table), and more frequent phone calls were associated with negative outcomes (see c. in table).

Note that these results do not indicate that certain types of family contact, such as telephone calls should be discouraged. Indeed, many unanswered questions remain. Certainly many of the family/friend visits and telephone calls were beneficial to the youth.

As we move forward, we plan to conduct additional research that focuses on those aspects of home visits and other contact that are especially helpful to youth so that we can help take advantage of opportunities for family engagement. It is noteworthy that the recent revision of the Family Home Program included an emphasis on increasing family engagement. Conversely, we also need to identify those aspects of every family/friend contact that are negative in order to diminish those effects. Ultimately, we are committed to help make family/friend contacts a positive factor in the youth’s treatment and outcomes.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Impact on Youth Outcomes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. More frequent home visits by youth were associated with...</td>
<td>▲ disruptive behavior during the last 2 weeks ▲ departure success ▲ follow-up success</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. More frequent family/friend visits to Boys Town were associated with...</td>
<td>no impact on disruptive behavior during last 2 weeks no impact on departure success no impact on follow-up success</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. More frequent telephone contacts with youth were associated with...</td>
<td>▲ disruptive behavior during the last 2 weeks ▲ departure success ▲ follow-up success</td>
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Note: ▲ = more, ▼ = less. Green font indicates statistically significant findings in the desired direction; red font indicates statistically significant findings not in the desired direction.

Family Engagement (cont’d)

How do you prepare youth and families for a youth home visit?

Prior to a youth going home on a home visit, we typically talk to both the youth and family to set some goals for them over that visit. We discuss the family’s goals and what their fears and expectations are at home for the youth. This helps us to clearly define goals for the youth. We encourage families to call us during the home visit if something isn’t going well, so we can help them find an appropriate way of handling the issue.

Can you describe a challenge you have experienced with family engagement?

There a variety of challenges that Family-Teachers face in bridging the gap between the youth and their family - many of which reflect back to past issues and habits of how the family has interacted. Families of our youth are sometimes reluctant to trust Family-Teachers because they don’t understand our role and don’t know us when their child arrives. The key to overcoming these challenges is to slowly build trust through open communication and consistency.

Can you describe a success you have experienced with family engagement?

We have had many successes engaging families of our youth. We are still in contact with several families and they will still call and ask for advice after the youth has already reunified with them. We have found that when you can engage the family and get them to see the benefits of working together as a team that the youth is going to be far more successful.

For example, we had a youth that came to our house with a baby that was 6 months old and her parents had to take care of her baby while she was with us. We worked with the family on how to encourage the youth to be a mother and how to communicate their concerns to each other. The youth ultimately graduated and by her accounts was a far better mother because of her time here.

Her mom and dad still call us and come to Boys Town every Christmas to help with some holiday traditions.