Boys Town Family Reunification Program Extends Positive Results

Over the past few decades, there has been a trend in child welfare towards shorter lengths of stay for youth in out-of-home care, and an increase in community-based services for at-risk families. This has created a need to blend residential and aftercare services in an effort to help youth departing out-of-home care to maintain gains after the youth reenters their family home and/or the community. To address this issue, Boys Town was awarded a $1 million service grant in 2007 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency (OJJDP) to develop the Family Reunification Program (FRP) at five Boys Town sites around the country (See DNYCU, Aug., 2007).

FRP was developed to be a unique combination of the Family Home Program (FHP) and In-Home Family Services (IHFS) and was designed for youth entering Boys Town from the Juvenile Justice system. By blending these two programs and by having an in-home consultant work with the family from the time of admission to FHP, FRP helped to reduce length of service to approximately 6-9 months (3-6 months in FHP, 2-3 months in IHFS), and was associated with improved parenting skills and reduced child misbehavior (See DNYCU, Aug., 2009).

The Study

In 2009, Boys Town was awarded another service grant to continue studying FRP at the same five original sites. We again measured child and parent functioning at the start and end of services to see if improvements were made. A few unique features of the current study are that a) we expanded our eligible sample to include youth in or at risk of entering the juvenile justice system, b) the in-home consultant began working with the family at the time of departure planning rather than at admission (e.g., about 2 months before departing the FHP), and c) we expanded our measures to include family strengths and stressors and peer involvement.

The Results

Length of Stay. Similar to the first FRP study, the average length of services was about 7 months, which was right on the 6-9 month target for this study. Specifically, youth spent approximately 5.5 months in the FHP and then just over 2.5 months being served in their homes by an in-home consultant.

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Positive Results (cont’d)

Alabama Parenting Questionnaire-9 (APQ-9). This 9-item parenting questionnaire measures three general areas: Poor Supervision (e.g., not leaving a note when going out), Inconsistent Discipline (e.g., not following through with punishment), and Positive Parenting (e.g., praise). As expected, results indicate that mean scores significantly improved from admission to departure for two of the three subscales: Poor Supervision (3.23 vs. 2.70) and Inconsistent Discipline (2.96 vs. 2.54). The Positive Parenting mean score did not change from admission to departure.

Strengths and Stressors-Reunification Scale (SS-R). This 45-item measure is completed by the in-home consultant during a conversation with the family. It is intended to identify family strengths as well as the level of family stress on eight areas of functioning: 1) Environment (e.g., community safety); 2) Social Support (e.g., interactions with friends); 3) Parental Capabilities (e.g., child supervision); 4) Family Interactions (e.g., parent/child communication); 5) Family Safety (e.g., no abuse); 6) Child Well-Being (e.g., peer relationship quality); 7) Child/Caregiver Ambivalence (importance of child’s needs); and 8) Reunification Readiness (e.g., family has addressed identified needs). All areas are rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (serious stressor) to 5 (clear strength).

Family mean scores significantly improved from admission to departure on the Child Well-Being (1.04 vs. 0.62), Parental Capabilities (0.41 vs. 0.82), and Family Safety (0.68 vs. 1.16) domains. As the FRP was designed to address child behavior and help parents improve their parenting skills, it is to be expected that Child Well-Being and Parenting Capabilities would improve. Improvements in Family Safety ratings could be a result of less parent/child conflict, thus creating a more safe environment.

Peer Involvement Questionnaire (PIQ). The (PIQ) is a five item questionnaire which was administered as a supplement to the SS-R. This questionnaire was developed by the study author to gain insight into youth peer interactions. From admission to departure, the youth were more likely to have friends that are their own age (66% vs. 76%), to engage in more positive activities with friends (42% vs. 58%), and to associate with more pro-social peers (42% vs. 59%). However, none of these differences were statistically significant. These results are promising, but still inconclusive for this important risk factor for youth in the Juvenile Justice system.

Conclusion

The results of both these studies together provide promising evidence that blending the Family Home Program and the In-Home Family Services Program can produce positive outcomes for youth who have entered or are at-risk of entering the Juvenile Justice system. At the same time that these studies were being conducted, we were conducting another study funded by the US Department of Education Institute for Educational Sciences to test a similar program called On the Way Home at the Nebraska-Iowa site (See DNYCU, Oct. 2011). Lessons learned from all this research positions Boys Town with evidence-based practices to support the successful transition of youth from residential care settings to permanent family and community placement.

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Implementing the Family Reunification Program (cont’d)

the youth comes home, and the time will be focused more on making the families comfortable with the skills instead of teaching them the skills. This degree of comfort with the skills helps empower the parent to use them more consistently.

What is the most effective aspect of the FRP?

Compared to the other in-home programs in New York, the most effective aspect of the FRP is that we have built a close relationship with the youth’s family before he/she returns home. This has made it much easier for families to buy into the model and accept the feedback that the FRP consultant gives. It also helps that the consultant begins to work with the family before the youth returns home. This helps the family feel more empowered when their child returns home.

Can you describe a success story?

In November 2011, Jonathan (not actual name) was admitted into the Family Home Program. Jonathan had poor social skills and an extremely poor relationship with his parents and a history of being abusive towards his mother. Jonathan remained in the Family Home Program for approximately 9 months and during this time he was also able to work with the FRP consultant. The consultant was able to continue to build on the skills the Family-Teachers had taught Jonathan and simultaneously work with the family. Jonathan was able to re-establish his relationship with his family and successfully reunified in August 2012. Since this time Jonathan has checked in regularly and continues to show progress in all areas of his life. He is still at home, graduated high school in May 2013, and is continuing to work on his relationship with his parents.

Note: Jasmin Singleton, Director of In-Home Family Services, also provided information for this interview.