**An Evaluation of the Parent Connectors Program at the Boys Town California Site**

The Parent Connectors Program (PCP) is a peer-to-peer support program developed by Drs. Albert Duchnowski and Krista Kutash at the University of South Florida. The program was designed to offer support for the caregivers of children with emotional-behavioral disorders. Parent Connectors (PCs) make weekly phone calls to parents to provide support and help with finding needed resources. PCs are parents who have a child of their own with behavioral or emotional difficulties who have successfully navigated the systems in place for these families. Their purpose is to encourage families to be engaged in their child’s services and to provide emotional support by sharing their own experiences.

An initial randomized controlled trial of PCP among parents of emotionally disturbed youth with special education needs found that parents who participated in the program reported an increase in the ability to advocate for their child’s mental health services, an increase in family empowerment and a decrease in caregiver strain. Additionally, the youth of these parents used mental health services three times more than those in the control group, had higher school attendance, fewer school suspensions, and larger increases in reading achievement.

Recently, a pilot study of the program was conducted at the Boys Town Day School on Home Campus in order to find out if the program could be successfully disseminated to another setting where the program creators were not directly overseeing implementation (see March 2012 issue). The Day School is an alternative school for youth unable to attend their local school due to academic or behavioral problems. The pilot study found that the majority (65%) of the parents got at least 60 minutes of contact with their PC during the school year, with an average total of six hours. Most participants who were contacted after program completion reported that they were satisfied with the program and would recommend it to others. Staff at the Day School reported that there were no negative effects to having the program implemented at the school and were pleased with the increased engagement of the parents who participated.

**Boys Town California Study**

The Orange County, California Boys Town site began implementing PCP in November 2012 as part of a larger program of Family Support Services, including Common Sense Parenting, family group workshops, and matching parents up with long-term informal supports. This is a unique adaptation of the PCP in that the program previously has been offered only to parents of youth in school special education programs. In the Orange County project, parents of at-risk youth are recruited from the community at large instead of just schools. This is a logical adaptation of the program as we continue to explore opportunities to use it to support parents whose children are involved in a variety of services.

Program evaluation data are collected from the PCP participants before, during, and after their time in the three-month program. At admission into the program, several demographic items are collected, as well as the responses to questions (continued on page 2)

**Implementing the Parent Connectors Program in Orange County, California**

We interviewed Jamie Pierce to describe the work Boys Town has been doing with families participating in the Parent Connectors Program (PCP) in Orange County, California.

**What is your role with the PCP?**

I supervise the Parent Coach, Nefta Pereda, as he works to support and guide the Parent Connectors. Together, we provide the guidance to maintain professional services while still allowing the Parent Connector to remain in the peer role. The Parent Coach facilitates weekly group consultation to increase the implementation of the key elements of the Parent Connector model: providing emotional support, informational support, and promoting positive attitudes towards engagement. These meetings provide consultation to Parent Connectors and creates atmosphere where they can support one another and share resources.

We are also collaborating with the National Research Institute, Angie Powers, and the creators of the PCP to identify ways to integrate this model successfully into the Boys Town continuum of services.

**What has been your biggest challenge?**

The biggest challenge has been consistently connecting with participating parents. The parents that are served typically have a lot of stressors and challenges. There are sometimes numerous appointments they are juggling to help themselves or their children. There have been times that families are only picking up the calls 30% of the time. However, the Parent Connectors have been implementing various engagement strategies to promote increased call connection. Despite this challenge, 93% of families report an increase in engagement and access to resources at the end of services.

(continued on page 2)
Implementing the Parent Connectors Program (cont’d)

Kelly, a Parent Connector, to start assisting her as Kelly had experienced a similar situation with her own son when he started school. Kelly encouraged and supported Lucille as she worked to collaborate with the local school district even when this avenue proved difficult. Kelly provided Lucille with resource information that led to a free testing center that eventually connected her to Orange County Regional Center. This connection proved invaluable as Lucille’s daughter was diagnosed with Autism and became eligible for services she really needed.

Kelly educated Lucille on how to advocate for her child and an Individualized Education Plan was put in place. Amanda was able to receive education services that she needed to promote her success. She now attended a school designed to promote her learning and social development. Kelly continued to assist Lucille, and the family was able to receive key respite services that allowed Raymond to be able to start working again full time.

Ultimately, the parents engaged the system of services and were willing to utilize the resources available to promote Amanda’s long-term educational, social, and emotional development.

Can you share an example of how PCP has helped a family?

The Carmichael family (all names are pseudonyms) was referred to the Parent Connector program through a Family Resource Center in Orange County. At the time, Lucille and Raymond were struggling with employment and financial issues. Their daughter, Amanda, had recently started school and was displaying social and developmental delays.

Lucille went to the Family Resource Center (FRC) feeling desperate and unsure of the next steps to take. The FRC told her about the Parent Connectors Program and she called and referred herself. Lucille was matched with Kelly, a Parent Connector, to start assisting her as Kelly had experienced a similar situation with her own son when he started school. Kelly encouraged and supported Lucille as she worked to collaborate with the local school district even when this avenue proved difficult. Kelly provided Lucille with resource information that led to a free testing center that eventually connected her to Orange County Regional Center. This connection proved invaluable as Lucille’s daughter was diagnosed with Autism and became eligible for services she really needed.

Kelly educated Lucille on how to advocate for her child and an Individualized Education Plan was put in place. Amanda was able to receive education services that she needed to promote her success. She now attends a school designed to promote her learning and social development. Kelly continued to assist Lucille, and the family was able to receive key respite services that allowed Raymond to be able to start working again full time.

Ultimately, the parents engaged the system of services and were willing to utilize the resources available to promote Amanda’s long-term educational, social, and emotional development.

Evaluation of Parent Connectors Program (cont’d)

about the Parent Connectors
steps to take. The FRC told her desperate and unsure of the next
developmental delays.

The data from a sample of participants (n = 139) who completed the program before July 2014 was analyzed for this evaluation. The typical participant was a 41 year old Hispanic (66%) female (93%) whose primary language was Spanish (51%). Parent Connectors had an average of eight phone calls with participants and spent, on average, a total of 267 minutes (4.5 hours) talking with each participant. The top three topics discussed were: 1) Encouragement and ways to take care of self, 2) The importance of social support, and 3) Expected benefits of engagement in services.

Outcomes. Participant outcomes were measured with the Well-Being Index (WBI) and the Protective Factors Survey (PFS). The WBI is a five-question survey that asks an individual to rate (0=no time to 5=all of the time) her current mental well-being (e.g., “I have felt cheerful and in good spirits”). The PFS is a 20-item survey designed to assess changes in family protective factors (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree).

For this study, we used the subscales that measure the family’s perceived social support and concrete support systems. The Social Support Scale indicates how much the participant feels she has other people in her life to lean on, while the Concrete Support Scale indicates whether she knows what to do/where to go to get resources, such as food or housing assistance. There was a statistically significant improvement from pre-to-post intervention for all three outcomes (see figure).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Well-Being Index*</th>
<th>PFS Social Support*</th>
<th>PFS Concrete Support*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre 2.3</td>
<td>Pre 3.1</td>
<td>Pre 4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post 3.2</td>
<td>Post 3.2</td>
<td>Post 2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*statistically significant (p &lt; .01)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Well-Being Index (n = 111) and Protective Factors Survey Results (n = 98)

These are promising results and we will continue to evaluate both the implementation of the program and outcomes for families enrolled in PCP at Boys Town California. If results continue to be positive, this project will hopefully result in new opportunities to implement the program there as well as other Boys Town sites.

Next Steps

With our research partners at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, we are in the second year of a four-year, $3.2M federally-funded randomized controlled trial of the PCP in Lincoln, NE and Omaha, NE public schools. This study will not only provide a scientifically rigorous evaluation of the program, but also another opportunity to learn how to implement the program with fidelity and target future use of the program for parents who are most likely to benefit.

The long-range goal is for the Parent Connectors Program to become another evidence-based family intervention for our Integrated Continuum of Care. This program has promise for helping us engage families in our other intervention programs, and also allows us to partner with parents as we employ them to mentor other parents. We think this program will be especially helpful for our community engagement, intervention, and impact initiative, which is a major component of the current Boys Town Strategic Plan.

Author contact info: 402.498.1272 or amy.stevens@boystown.org

Amy Stevens has a M.A. from New Mexico State University in Biological Anthropology. Amy has worked as a Research Analyst for Boys Town for seven years. Amy creates and disseminates the Foster Family Services Implementation Dashboards and the Psychotropic Medication Report. She does data collection and reporting for the Parent Connectors program at the California site and for the four-year UNL-Boys Town Parent Connectors Program grant.

Jamie Pierce has a M.S. from Bellevue University in Human Services. Prior to working for Boys Town, Jamie completed National Service with AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps and worked for the State of Nebraska in Human Services. Jamie has worked for Boys Town for almost nine years and has experience working in In-Home Family Services in both Iowa and Nebraska in various positions. Currently, Jamie is the Director of the Community Support Services program at Boys Town California.