Follow-Up Interviews for Youth and Families who have Received Boys Town Services

Have you ever wondered if a youth is successful after leaving Boys Town? Are youth able to maintain the skills they learned at Boys Town? What challenges do families face after completing Boys Town services? Boys Town is one of the few youth care agencies that conduct systematic follow-up interviews with youth and families to answer some of these questions. However, finding former youth and families is a challenging endeavor, thus we have five staff in the National Research Institute Data Support department who are assigned to this effort.

We conduct 3-, 6-, 12-, and 24-month follow-up interviews with youth/families who have departed Boys Town programs or services so we can learn more about the areas in which they are succeeding and the areas in which they are experiencing difficulties. Given the enormity of this task, we use specialized software to help with various aspects of the follow-up process, including: collecting and maintaining updated contact information, using the proper follow-up schedule, keeping a log of attempted contacts, and entering completed follow-up interview information.

Follow-Up Interview Results

Since 2008, Boys Town has collected 27,099 surveys (15,069 Out-of-Home, 11,529 In-Home Family Services and 501 Care Coordination (started in 2015)). We typically attempt approximately 450 follow-up interviews per month and it takes an average of 7 calls to connect with a person to interview. An average interview takes approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete, but can take longer if the respondent choses to share details of their experience or requests information regarding additional services. To-date, results from the interviews have been overwhelmingly positive. For example, there were 9,225 interviews that were completed between January 2010 and December 2015 for youth that received out-of-home services, and over 90% of respondents reported that Boys Town had a positive impact on the youth’s life. In addition, the results showed that over 90% of these youth are attending school or have graduated and more than 90% remained abuse and neglect free up to two years after services. See the figures on page two for additional follow-up results for the Family Home and In-Home Family Services programs.

My Interview Experiences

After two years working as a research assistant conducting these follow-up interviews, the biggest challenge I face in my job is simply finding the youth/families. It is not uncommon for past clients to be living in shelters, treatment facilities, or detention centers and contacting them for an interview can be difficult. By the time of the initial follow-up interview, usually around six months after discharge, it is common for clients’ phones to be disconnected, agency connections lost, and family members to be out-of-contact with each other. Fortunately, when we do connect with a client or their representative they are generally willing to give us a few minutes of their time, but not always. Not all former clients are satisfied with the services they received from Boys Town and some refuse to be interviewed. Others do not have time or are not comfortable being interviewed over the phone by someone they’ve never met.

While some clients are not willing or able to be interviewed, many clients are happy to provide feedback and listening to respondents share their experiences is the aspect of my job I enjoy most. It helps that some people are excited to see Boys Town on their caller ID; however, based on my experience, clients are not generally hoping to participate in a follow-up interview, but rather hoping to talk to someone offering additional services. Even so, many respondents appreciate that Boys Town cares enough to seek out their opinion and often encourage future phone calls. Many people are excited to share what they learned through Boys Town services.

For example, I’ve grown to love the word technique. I hear it all the time from mothers describing what they learned from their Consultants, and how they continue to use the parenting techniques they were taught during services. It is just as common for parents to mention the specific skills their child has developed with the help of Boys Town services, such as how to cope with adversity, disagree appropriately, and show respect for others, and many are optimistic that these skills will continue to progress and lead to further improvements.

Though follow-up data can provide insight from a unique angle, it seldom tells the whole story. Boys Town services are often only one step in a continuous process, but that does not make them any less valuable. The overall impression I get from follow-up interviews is that most youth and families that received services have and are continuing to improve. It didn’t take long to appreciate the gratitude many former clients still have for Family Teachers, Consultants, and other direct care staff with whom they worked. Clients often report maintaining contact with their service provider after services.

Still, as former clients often deal with multiple stressors and ongoing risk factors, improvements are often subtle and measuring success is difficult. For example, a mother that received in-home services in Louisiana once responded that her family’s basic needs were being met (i.e., food, shelter, heat and water), only to reveal a few minutes later that she was living with her two children in a homeless shelter. It may not be typical to consider a mother raising two children in a shelter as a success, but she had been a victim of domestic abuse and even though she was in a shelter, according to her, since Boys Town’s involvement, her family’s situation had improved.
Follow-Up Interviews (cont’d)

Indeed, there’s ambiguity in almost every case. In most situations I come across involving children with problem behaviors, the parents will typically respond that things have improved, but that positive change has been slow and difficult to maintain. Less commonly, parents report that after departing Boys Town and returning to the same environments as before, initial improvements fade and negative behaviors recur. In my experience, respondents attribute the return of problem behaviors to a number of factors, such as the child departing Boys Town before he/she was ready, a lack of available aftercare, or other external, environmental influences (e.g., poverty, negative peer influence).

Clients will often continue to need help after Boys Town services. Interviewing clients post-discharge has given me a much better idea of the ongoing challenges clients oftentimes face after services have ended. Even after successfully completing services, many families continue to look to Boys Town for help as they struggle with ongoing, stress-inducing issues such as physical/psychological trauma, substance abuse, and mental health disorders. Unfortunately, for every client Boys Town serves, there are many more they cannot, and often those that have received services will seek additional assistance in the future. If conducting follow-up interviews has taught me anything over the last two years it’s that there will always be more families in need of assistance.

Conclusion

Every interview is different, but one thing is certain: it is very humbling listening to people talk about the help they have received through Boys Town services. To add to my humility, many parents and caseworkers don’t differentiate between one person and another at Boys Town and thus I have been thanked many times on behalf of Boys Town employees that are very good at helping people learn to help themselves. I would like to take an opportunity now to pass along the thanks I have received from multitudes of clients to all the staff members who have helped them.

In one hundred years, Boys Town’s campus has transformed from a barn providing a roof and occasional hot meal for a few orphan boys into a nearly self-sustaining community for more than four-hundred boys and girls who experience a family-style treatment environment on campus—in addition to providing a continuum of services to youth and families in multiple states across the USA. While many of the clients we interview will need to seek out additional help in the future, the vast majority report that Boys Town services had a positive impact on their lives.

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