



NATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION CENTRE

Building the Evidence – EVALUATION SUMMARIES

2008-ES-17

MIDDLE SCHOOLS PROJECT: FAMILIES & SCHOOLS TOGETHER FOR CHILDREN AND NEIGHBOURHOODS



The Middle Schools Project involved implementing the Middle Years F&ST program, an adaptation of the *Families and Schools Together* (F&ST) model. Middle Years F&ST is aimed at pre-teens (9 to 12 years old) who exhibited risk factors such as family disorganization and isolation, school difficulties, and aggressive behaviour. It was offered in six schools in four provinces across Canada over a three-year period beginning in 2002/03.

The goal was to develop resilience in children and build protective factors to reduce the likelihood of future violence and criminal behaviour. Expected outcomes included:

- reduced behavioural problems at home, at school, and in the community,
- growth in social skills,
- improved family cohesion and adaptability,
- expanded support systems,
- greater interaction with and attachment to the school and community,
- greater family stability, and
- improvement in the child’s academic performance.

A collaborative team including school staff, community agency representatives, parents and youth was formed at each school to plan and deliver weekly sessions for families and their children over an 11 week period. Program activities included a family meal, family communication games, time for children to socialize with one another, a parent support group, and one-to-one time between parent and child. After the 11 weeks, parents could join F&STWORKS, and attend monthly support meetings for a further two years. Over the course of the project, 206 families graduated from the program.

Project Assessment

A quasi-experimental design was used for the evaluation. Data was collected from the participants for an 11-week non-intervention period prior to program start and again at intake, thus enabling the

evaluator to compare any changes occurring over the 11 weeks of the program with those occurring during the earlier period. Post-program data was collected at one and two-year intervals afterward to determine whether program goals were met and sustained. Standardized instruments were used to collect data on children’s behaviour, parental social support, and family characteristics. Information on program implementation, parental satisfaction, and behavioural incidents at school was obtained through additional questionnaires, school records, observation, focus groups, and interviews.

Key Findings

The process evaluation revealed that:

- Over 30% of the children functioned below grade level academically at intake.
- 89.5% either had received historically, or were currently receiving, some type of special service (e.g. learning assistance, speech therapy, psychological services) from the education system.
- 45% of families who entered the program reported income levels below \$30,000 per year.
- On entry, children had social skills below the mean as rated by parents and teachers on the Social Skills Rating Scale (SSRS).
- Most families attended all 9 family sessions; the mean for graduating families was 8.4.

The outcome evaluation revealed that:

- Parents gave the program a mean rating of 8.7/10, indicating high satisfaction. The majority also reported improved relationships with their child, with school personnel, and with other parents.
- Standardized instruments revealed no change in family adaptability. Family cohesion increased slightly over time. There was no statistically significant shift in the level of social isolation over time on the Parent Involvement and Support Survey.
- Children's social skills ratings improved post-program, but the scores returned to intake levels after one year.
- There were no statistically significant positive results with regard to problem behaviours, hyperactivity, or attention ratings over time.
- A small but statistically significant difference in teachers' ratings of academic competency occurred between Intake and Year 1 follow-up.
- Some children showed significant reductions in school office referrals.

Lessons Learned

- The F&ST Middle School Project targeted some very high-risk families whose difficulties were entrenched to the point where a prevention program was not likely to have desired results and a program of greater intensity and duration might be more appropriate.
- In the Middle Years program, the age range among the children and their siblings is wider than that in the original F&ST program for younger families. Provision needs to be made for this in the program activities.
- Unless there is sufficient enrolment (about 12 families), the costs of operating the program on a per-family basis escalates substantially.
- Allowances need to be made in multi-year planning for personnel changes that occur over time both in the team and in the sponsoring organization.
- More attention needs to be paid to longer-term connections with the families once they graduate from F&ST, given what is already known about longer term behavioural change and the more entrenched family dynamics once the child reaches pre-adolescence.
- School burn-out was an unanticipated factor in several schools. Administrative support to mitigate the burden on school personnel is critical, and it appears that most schools should not attempt to run more than one cycle per year of the Middle Years program.

Conclusion

The Middle Years F&ST program is very well received by families once they become engaged. Some short-term gains are evident but many of these do not appear to hold over time for the majority of families. The differences between the qualitative results reported by families, which were very positive, and the statistical evidence may be due to either instrument limitations or the effects of the attention that was focussed on the families (Hawthorne effect) or both.

Given the differences with previous evaluation results for the program with younger children, where greater changes were reported post-program, the model on which F&ST for the Middle Years is based may be more appropriate with a younger age group.

For more information or to receive a copy of the final evaluation report please contact the National Crime Prevention Centre at 1-877-302-6272 or visit our website at: www.publicsafety.gc.ca/ncpc.

If you wish to register for the NCPC mailing list to receive information from the Centre please visit the subscription page at: www.PublicSafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/maillinglist/subscribe-en.aspx.

It is also possible to visit the Family Service Canada web site at: <http://www.familyservicecanada.org/>.