OCD | OFFICE OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Children, Youth & Families

background

Preventing Problem Behaviors

All In The Family

Strengthening parents, families shows promise

Parents and families wield considerable influence over the behaviors of their children. But at a time when youth problems are high, American parents are spending less time parenting and less time at home. Some feel powerless to compete with peers and the entertainment media in shaping their children's behavior.

Strengthening parents and families so they are better able to steer children away from crime, drug use, and other problem behaviors is an approach several prevention-oriented programs have shown can work, when given a chance.

Related Reports

Community-wide approaches to curbing behavior problems among young people can work, but few are implemented in ways that give them a chance.

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Family Dynamics Have Changed

Major changes within families in recent decades leave children more vulnerable to the influence of people other then their parents. The number of working mothers with young children has almost doubled. More children live in single-parent families today and their numbers are steadily climbing.

In Pennsylvania, two-thirds of families have children in child care or an educational program on a weekly basis, with about 25% of children spending at least 35 hours per week in child care or a early education classroom, according to a survey of Pennsylvania families with young children done in 2002 by the Universities Children's Policy Collaborative, a collaborative of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, the Pennsylvania State University College of Health and Human Development, and the Center for Public Policy of Temple University.

Family Protections

Strong families and effective parents cloak children in protective factors, promote resiliency, and reduce problem behavior. These protective factors include a positive relationship between parent and child, strong supervision, consistent discipline, and communication of family values. Children are also more resilient when their parents help them develop their dreams, goals, and purpose in life.

Studies show just how important family influences can be. For example, concern about parent disapproval of alcohol and drug use is the chief reason children avoid drinking and using drugs, and it tends to discourage drug and alcohol use into the 12th grade.[1]

Likewise, a strong family environment has been found to be a major reason why youth avoid delinquent and unhealthy behaviors.[2]

Two major federal studies that ex-

amined approaches to curbing adolescent problem behaviors report family-strengthening approaches show promise.

The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention's Prevention Enhancement Protocols System (PEPS) and the National Institute of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Strengthening America's Families Project report that a number of interventions to improve parenting and family dynamics reduce the risk of adolescent problems, including violent and delinquent behaviors, substance abuse, suicide, teen pregnancy, and school failure.

The successful programs appear to promote family protective and resiliency factors in addition to helping to reduce family risk factors.

But few families can take advantage of these programs. Only 10% of family interventions developed over the past 20 years are used by community agencies.[3]

(Continued from front)

In addition to individual programs, several effective, evidence-based strategies have been identified. Behavioral parent training is one approach that shows strong evidence of positive outcomes. Skills training focuses on making cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes in the parent. The approach encourages practices such as increasing positive interactions with children through play, rewarding children for good behavior, making clear requests, and clearly explaining consequences.

Studies show behavioral parent training works best with children ages 3 years to 10. About two-thirds of children whose parents had behavioral training show significant improvements.[4]

Another successful approach is family skills training. Behavioral parent training is combined with social and life skills training for children and family practice sessions. Parents learn such skills as therapeutic play. Children learn skills such as how to manage anger, accept and give criticism and praise, solve problems, and be assertive. Family practice time explores issues such as discipline and communication.

Studies suggest each component influences different outcomes. Parent training reduces conduct disorders, child training improves social competency, and family practice sessions tend to improve family relationships.[5]

Such family-based programs, when added to community or school-based prevention programs, tend to increase their effectiveness by allowing programs to address more risks and strengthen protective and resiliency factors.

Keys To Success

Family-based programs that succeed in preventing adolescent problem behaviors share several characteristics.

- Comprehensive, multi-component programs are more effective than single-component interventions.
- Family-focused programs are more effective for families with relationship problems.
- Improving family relations, communication, and parental monitoring are key components of effective parent and family programs.
- Outcomes are more likely to be long-lasting when programs produce cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes in family dynamics and environment.
- The greater the risks faced by families, the more intensive an intervention needs to be.
- Programs tend to be more effective when begun prenatally or in early childhood, especially when parents are very dysfunctional.
- Shaping programs to suit cultural traditions of families improves recruitment, retention, and sometimes effectiveness.
- Effectiveness is greatly influenced by the characteristics of the trainers, such as confidence, warmth, humor, and empathy.
- Interactive skills training, such as role playing or family practice sessions, are more effective and more appealing to families than lecturing.
- Encouraging families to identify their own solutions helps to strengthen relationships between the program and families involved.

Both family-based and community-based programs have been successful in preventing problem behaviors among young people – but only when they are carefully designed and implemented in ways that take advantage of strategies proven to work.

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