STRONG FAMILIES, STRONG CHILDREN:
A FAMILY-FOCUSED CRIME PREVENTION PROGRAM

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*ABSTRACT: The SFSC initiative is a community-based crime prevention
program that addresses the needs of families with at-risk children between
the ages of 5 and 12. In the fall of 1999, the National Crime Prevention
Centre, in conjunction with W. Morrison & Associates, undertook a three-
year evaluation of this program. Process evaluation outcomes from this
study indicated a strong degree of convergence between the proposed pro-
gram design and the actual application of this initiative in the community.
Interim outcome evaluation results also highlighted decreases in child
behavioural opposition, and lower levels of stress related to parent-child
interactions. Lessons learned related to the program's implementations are
also discussed.*

*Key words: crime prevention, family-focused, parent-child interactions,
program evaluation*

The following summary provides an overview of the Strong Families
Strong Children initiative and various research highlights from the inter-
im evaluation report submitted to the National Crime Prevention Centre
by W. Morrison & Associates Inc one year following the program's imple-
mentation. The final three-year evaluation report was completed in
December 2003 (W. Morrison & Associates, 2003).

BACKGROUND

In 1999, Moncton Youth Residences Inc. received funding from the
Crime Prevention Council of Canada to implement the Strong Families
Strong Children (SFSC) program in the South-East Region of New
Brunswick. In the Greater Moncton area, there are early stimulation and
Headstart programs available for pre-school children; however, similar
prevention programs have not been accessible for children 5 to 12 years of
age (Bourque, Bradshaw, Cormier, Morrison & Perry, 2000). The SFSC
initiative was proposed as a cost-effective crime prevention model to meet

this identified service-need area. The intent of this service is to promote competent parenting, increase positive family interactions, and to address specific behavioural features in children that impede their successful functioning in home and community settings. More specifically, the s ervices are designed to:

- develop a collaborative working relationship with families;
- provide high-risk children and their parents with the support and resources they need to address their present challenges and concerns;
- strengthen the relationships between families, schools, and the community;
- encourage partnerships among police, community professionals, and agencies in the delivery of services;
- provide an effective service model for crime prevention that may be replicated or adapted for implementation in other communities.

The intended outcomes for this program are to build richer relationships and improved communication within families with fewer children being placed in care, and eventually, less youth crime in the Greater Moncton community.

PROGRAM INDICATORS

Key indicators or variables were monitored during the initial program implementation to investigate the functioning and progress of children and families in the SFSC program. These included:

- Developmental and health considerations
- Behavioural and emotional functioning
- Academic performance
- Family cohesion and organization
- Parenting competencies
- Community involvement
- Basic living conditions

Data gathered relevant to these indicators of child and family functioning, both during and upon participants' completion of the program, provided the basis from which to examine the impact of this crime prevention initiative.

PROGRAM ELEMENTS

The SFSC program offers an array of supports that are coordinated through an individualized service plan designed to meet the specific needs of each family. The average duration of the program for each family is 9 months. The key activities and interventions offered by the SFSC program are as follows.

Family In-Home Support

This program is an in-home intervention service intended to enhance the functioning and cohesion of the family. Family Workers meet with each family once a week for one to two hours. The purpose of this service is to prevent unnecessary out-of-home placements and to promote positive parent-child interactions. This service assists families in identifying their challenges and strengths, and leads to the development and implementation of a personalized care plan.

Family Nurturing for Parents and Children

The goal of this activity is to foster close and positive family interactions. This program component is based on a 12-week curriculum offered one and a half hours per week. Concurrent sessions are held for parents and children. Some central themes dealt with in these sessions are praise and affirmation, fostering autonomy, self-esteem, basic needs, choices and consequences, communication, and anger management.

Parent Luncheons

Luncheons are intended to serve as a follow-up to the Family Nurturing Program. During these meeting times, parents have the opportunity to share their concerns and successes. Presentations are structured to include both skill development and sharing activities. Parent Luncheons are held every second Wednesday of the month.

Social Skills for the Prevention of Aggressive Behaviours in Children

This 12-session program component is designed to foster the development of pro-social skills in children. Sessions are held once per week for $1\,^1/_2$ hours and include two social skills groups, one for 5 to 8 year-olds and another for children 9 to 12 years of age. Stories, discussions, role-plays, games, and arts and crafts are used to complement the curriculum that addresses such topics as expressing feelings, listening, and problem solving.

Family Fun Times

Family Fun Times are organized to provide families with a forum in which to engage in positive and nurturing interactions. This program component is undertaken once each month and involves an activity in the local community that may subsequently be repeated by families on their own.

Family Resources Lending Library

A lending library, comprised of an assortment of books, games, videos, and specialized resources serves to support and enhance the family interventions and educational services of the SFSC program. Parents and their children are encouraged to borrow pertinent resources during their participation in the program. The Resource Lending Library provides information on the following topics: feelings, bullying, self-esteem, family violence, divorce, dealing with loss, anger, and parenting.

INTERIM PROCESS EVALUATION HIGHLIGHTS

Preliminary process data was gathered during the first year of the program's implementation (W. Morrison & Associates, 2002b). Research activities included the development of a baseline family profile, completion of participant satisfaction questionnaires, and administration of interviews with program personnel and community service providers.

Baseline family profile
- The children in the program ranged from 5 to 12 years of age and often were living in a single-parent family.
- Recent parental concerns that were noted included moving, divorce or separation, and death or illness in the family.
- Approximately 40% of participant families accessed income assistance, just over 50% of them having a monthly income between $1000 and $2000.
- Parents rated their children's academic performance as below average. On the Canada Quick Individual Educational Test, mean achievement results for spelling, arithmetic, and passage comprehension ranged from below average to the low average range.
- With respect to behavioural functioning, parents' noted concerns for their children often included inattention, anger, impulsiveness, and aggression. On the standardized Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL), aggressive and oppositional behaviour was reported in the borderline to clinical range. The Parenting Stress Index (PSI) results indicated that the majority of the children exhibited behaviours that were stressful for the parent-child relationship.
- Parents reported a need for assistance with identification and implementation of effective parenting strategies. The results of the PSI indicated that many parents conveyed feelings of being "overwhelmed" by their child's behaviour and had a desire to increase their practical knowledge of child management skills to address areas of immediate concern.

Client satisfaction interviews
- The majority of parents agreed that the service had assisted in their child's development of intrapersonal (confidence and expressiveness) and interpersonal (getting along with other children and adults) skills.
- Many parents noted that the SFSC program had had a notable positive impact on their families and was helpful for enhancing family relationships.
- Parents reported that their participation in the SFSC program had been beneficial for improving their discipline strategies and in re-establishing a sense of hope.
- Relationships between the families and program staff were generally

described as open and encouraging.
Community service provider interviews
- Local community service providers indicated that they perceived the primary goals of the SFSC program to include enhancing parent effectiveness, fostering positive family interactions, and providing family-focused services.
- The SFSC program was perceived as a necessary service and one that could be potentially effective in supporting crime prevention efforts in the community.

INTERIM OUTCOME EVALUATION HIGHLIGHTS

The purpose of the interim outcome evaluation was to examine potential areas of change in the functioning of children and families who had participated in the SFSC program during the first year of the initiative. For this aspect of the report, a control group comparison was undertaken (W. Morrison & Associates, 2002a). Control group participants included families who had previously been involved with a Headstart program in the same region.

Three analyses were undertaken:

- Baseline comparison of SFSC group with the Headstart control group
- Baseline and post-program changes for the SFSC group
- Comparison of change over time (1 year) between the SFSC group and the control group

The initial analysis revealed that the Headstart group provided a reasonable comparison group appropriate for further analysis. The second outcome analysis indicated positive changes associated with the functioning of SFSC participants following their involvement in the program. With respect to child functioning, there were noted decreases in behavioural opposition and misconduct. Similarly, parental concerns regarding areas of behavioural difficulties also decreased. Areas of overall stress related to parent-child interactions also declined. In addition, following their participation in the program, parents conveyed a higher level of belief in their own abilities to parent effectively.

The third analysis entailed an examination of the degree of change in both the SFSC treatment group and the Headstart control group. In comparison to the control group, the SFSC group improved more on measures of delinquency and acting-out behaviours. Parents of both groups reported less stress overall related to parent-child interactions. Improvements were also noted for the SFSC group with respect to less frequent peer associations that involved misbehaviour and misconduct.

LESSONS LEARNED DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF IMPLEMENTATION

As a result of the evaluation process, program personnel and members of the research evaluation team reported various key insights related to the initial implementation of the program. Some of the preliminary lessons learned included the following.

Provide new workers with an orientation that incorporates both theoretical and practical training components prior to their involvement in the program. For new family program workers, orientation processes should be in place and should incorporate clinical concepts relating to knowledge of criminogenic factors, family intervention, and competency-based methods.

Identify areas of family strength, interest, and potential that may be useful for subsequent case planning. At the outset of the case planning process, exploration of interest areas, personal preferences, and strengths are important considerations. Such interactions facilitate the development of a positive working relationship and allow for the identification of points of connection that may be useful in community and school-based planning.

Maintain positive and hopeful family meetings. Individual family meetings should be kept positive and always conclude by providing increased hope for family members. Debriefing and venting are important aspects of family meeting times; however, identifying small-step successes, exploring areas of strength and interest, and setting attainable goals help facilitate both hope and a sense of optimism in meeting daily challenges.

Seek clinical consultation as part of initial baseline data-gathering efforts. Clinical consultation is most useful when it is part of the initial data gathering with the family. Early identification of strengths, challenges, and areas of clinical concern permits interventions to be tailored to the needs of the individual family. At times, such consultation is a key consideration in linking families with additional and more intensive services should they be required.

Address basic need concerns prior to the implementation of other family interventions. For several families, basic food and shelter needs were areas of concern. In these instances, the linking of families with specific community support agencies to address these basic needs was a priority action for the various family workers. In this regard, addressing basic needs was an important first consideration prior to developing or implementing plans for other areas of change.

Use activity-based and time-limited, skill-building sessions for children. Many of the activities designed for use in the Social Skills and Family Nurturing groups were adapted to ensure increased participation of the children who attended these programs. In addition to providing two age-group options, program components included hands-on activities that incorporated interesting content and that were brief in duration.

Facilitate collaborative planning between parents and school personnel in addressing academic concerns. For several families, involvement of the family

worker in establishing links with the school was an important consideration. Clarifying areas of concern, identifying approaches for making contact, and working with school personnel were often key deliberations undertaken during family meetings. In addition, attendance of the worker with the parent at specific school meetings was considered both supportive and encouraging for parents during their initial communications with teachers and school staff.

Encourage ongoing program review and professional reflection among SFSC staff. A few times a year, staff should have the opportunity to review and reflect upon the various programs, client dynamics, and group programs that have characterized the last several months of service delivery. During the past year, a focus group format was employed to elicit key themes related to program implementation and challenges, client concerns and needs, and how areas of difficulty were worked through. This reflection process was viewed as important for mobilizing staff to identify key insights that might be helpful for fostering continued enhanced practice and program planning.

Sustain the SFSC initiative by increasing community awareness of the program and its value as an early intervention crime prevention initiative. The initial support for the program has been quite positive; however, there are still many agencies that have not yet become acquainted with this family intervention program. Ideally, the research outcomes from this program evaluation should provide a valuable source of information from which to promote community awareness regarding the relevance and potential effectiveness of this community crime prevention program.

References

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