

YCRA RESEARCH

BRIEF:

FAMILY DISENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH OFFENDERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELORS

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Summary: This study investigated the differences among youth offenders for family engagement (as measured by the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales–III) and conduct-disordered behaviors (as measured by Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [4th ed., text revision] criteria) by means of the Youth Comprehensive Risk Assessment (YCRA). Results indicated significant differences in conduct-disordered behaviors between youth with less familial engagement compared to youth with more family engagement. Resulting implications for counselors are included.

Key Points in the Literature:

- Family engagement or bonding has been found to be an important component for successful functioning of youth (Coll, Thobro, & Haas, 2004; Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994).
- Recent studies have indicated that strong family attachment provides youth with support needed to shape positive development and behaviors (Blustein, Preziono, & Schultheiss, 1995; Blustein, Walbridge, Friedlander, & Palladino, 1991; Coll et al., 2004; Kenny, 1990).
- Evidence has also indicated that low family support and attachment influence poor decision making and low commitment to the future (Eigen, Hartman, & Hartman, 1987; Guerra & Braungart-Rieker, 1999; Kinnier, Brigman, & Noble, 1990).
- McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, and McWhirter (2004) noted that members in low-engaged families cannot get their social and emotional needs met within the family, nor do they learn appropriate ways to meet the needs of others.
- Youth generally exhibit attitudes and display behaviors that are often consistent with learning that occurred in their families (Bowen, 1978).
- Fenell and Weinhold (1989) and Horne and Ohlsen (1982) described powerful learned family dynamics that are typically passed from one generation to the next, even if a member or the new generation is not in current contact with the previous one.
- Family experiences and family dynamics strongly influence attitudes and behaviors toward others (Herr & Cramer, 1992).
- Often aggression, conflict, and violence are present in a youth offender's family and can have negative effects on development (Coll et al., 2004).
- If the family violence and conflict are chronic and parents respond to the youth's challenging behaviors with harsh, negative, and inconsistent parenting styles, then aversive and aggressive behavior on the part of the youth is very likely (McWhirter et al., 2004). This hostile interaction style and inconsistent discipline often leads to low family engagement and poor bonding (McWhirter et al., 2004).

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study was to answer the following questions: How can counselors working with youth offenders and their families acknowledge and reinforce strengths while helping identify and modify those counter-productive attitudes and behaviors? Do some youth see treatment as a threat to their continued commitment to conduct-disordered and other high-risk behaviors? Can counselors effectively deliver treatment that can help more disengaged youth to think and act in more relational and empathetic ways? Are counselors able to discern and discuss with families the systematic and circular dynamic of youths' problematic behaviors—e.g., reinforcing more disengaged behaviors from family members, thus driving more problematic youth behaviors?

Methods: Master's-level helping professionals administered the assessments used in this study.

Each counselor had either a counseling or a social work degree. Assessments were standardized and occurred within the first three weeks of the participants' stay at the facility per requirement from the agency's accrediting body, JCAHO.

Participants: Study data were collected from all admitted youth offenders who stayed 6 months or longer during a 1-year period at an adolescent residential school and mental health treatment facility. This facility is located in the rural Rocky Mountain region of the United States. The participants ($N = 298$), ages 12-18, were court mandated for a variety of offenses ranging from running away to serious and violent crimes (e.g., assault or sexual perpetration). Of the adolescents, 40% ($n = 119$) were female, and 60% ($n = 179$) were male. Data collection occurred over a 1.5-year investigation period. Of these participants, 90% ($n = 268$) were European American, 5% ($n = 15$) self-reported being Hispanic, and the remaining 5% ($n = 15$) self-reported being American Indian/Alaska Native. The average age was 14.5 years (range = 12-17), and the average length of stay was between 6 and 10 months ($M = 8.6$ months).

Instruments used: The Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales—III [Faces III], the conduct disorder criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [4th ed., text revision] or DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000, and the Youth Comprehensive Risk Assessment (YCRA).

Key Results: Results from the FACES-III instrument revealed that more than half of the youth participants in this study rated their families as "disengaged" on the Cohesion Scale. This percentage is profound when compared with the group norm of 16% (Olson et al., 1985). Twenty four percent (24%) indicated "separated" perceptions of their families per the Cohesion Scale, compared with the group norm of 34% (Olsen et al., 1985); 21% indicated "connected" perceptions of their families per the Cohesion Scale, compared with the group norm of 36% (Olsen et al., 1985). Only 3% of the youths described their families as enmeshed on the Cohesion Scale compared with the norm group of 14% (Olsen et al., 1985).

The average conduct-disordered behaviors reported over the past 6 months were 5.35 items, well above

the clinically significant 3 items in the DSM-IV-TR. For the YCRA, the risk-to-self average for all youths was 12.5 out of a possible 24, the substance abuse mean was 4.4 out of a possible score of 8, and the family resources average score was 5.9 out of a possible 8, indicating moderate to high risk in these areas.

Low family engagement was found to be associated with negative antisocial behavior, especially related to destruction of property, serious violations of the rules, and deceitfulness and theft (e.g., recently stayed out late, ran away, been truant from school, and been more likely to lie, steal items of nontrivial value, and break into someone else's house, car, or building).

Key Conclusions/Recommendations:

- A family intervention program to address these and other questions is currently being piloted at this treatment facility
- Components of the intervention include ongoing discussion and specific *goal setting with families* based on the FACES-III Cohesion Scale items and thorough *asset searching* to reinforce strengths and adoptable functioning of the youths and family.
- Counselors are being active in structuring and monitoring family interaction to *block or interrupt disruptive family interactions*.
- The youth offender counselors at this agency are also striving to set modest *concrete objectives* to be reached through small increments of change to reduce anxiety and help families maintain change over time, per Olsen's suggestions.
- *Specific systemic interventions* agency wide are currently being discussed and have been inspired by the "Bridge Program" (Crowley & Bishop, 2008), including
 - introducing families to staff members who are involved with their children,
 - creating a calendar of events to keep families better informed,
 - inviting family members to go along on field trips and
 - attend special activities.