



Building Strong Families

Building Strong Families: Challenges and Choices is a research-based educational program that helps families identify and build on their strengths, face challenges, and make informed choices.

An interdisciplinary program of Human Environmental Sciences University of Missouri Extension

Building Strong Families: Challenges and Choices

Program Impacts from A Whole Family Approach Program Evaluation May 2008

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Introduction

University of Missouri Extension's *Building Strong Families: Challenges and Choices* program (<http://extension.missouri.edu/bsf>) helps families learn skills to create stronger families, improve relationships and increase communication. The program draws from an interactive, 13-topic curriculum to provide a series of life skills workshops that are supported by strength-based research. Building Strong Families targets working families with children but can be adapted for other audiences. A parallel curriculum for youth is in development and currently has six topics with other modules to be added. The youth and adult curriculums can be used in stand-alone programs, or in conjunction with one another for a Whole Family Approach.

University of Missouri Extension offered a series of the Building Strong Families Program to 20 families in Randolph County in March and April 2006. Topics included Family Strengths, Communicating, Self-Esteem, Balancing Responsibilities and Managing Stress. To see if adults and youth made life changes after attending the program, an evaluation team asked both youth and adult participants to complete Pre- and Post-tests at the beginning and end of the series. Adult participants also were surveyed by telephone in spring 2007, one year from the end of the program.

Survey Results

Youth Survey Results

Eleven youth took part in the Pre-Test, with five youth taking part in the Post-Test. Data obtained from the youth will be of limited use due to small sample size and because of incomplete surveys and questionable comprehension of the survey by youth. However, this study shows several implications for further research.

Researchers determined that due to the nature of working with young children, in the future, more than one researcher is needed when administering the surveys to help ensure the youth's survey comprehension. Administering surveys in one-on-one interviews might prove to be the ideal situation, and this method would allow open-ended questions about the youth's family life and the Building Strong Families program. Gathering more data may shed light on whether outcomes on a parent's survey coincide with outcomes for their child on the youth survey.

Adult Survey Results: Family Changes as a Result Building Strong Families

Of 18 respondents that completed some part of the survey, 12 completed the Post-Test and 9 completed both the Pre- and Post-tests. These participants reported a total of 14 non-duplicated children on their surveys. For children living in the home, ages ranged from 1 year of age to age 10, with an average age of 5.3. The most common number of children reported by respondents was 2, and none had more than 3.

Increased Satisfaction with Relationships

This research indicates that the Building Strong Families program helped families. This occurred as parents improved their parenting efforts and made specific efforts to improve family relationships. Specifically, we learn that families found the program to be most helpful in

two areas in which they indicated greatest concern: Managing Stress and Balancing Responsibilities.

Ratings for “Family Strengths” improved as well, while “Kids and Self-Esteem,” showed the most increase in ratings over any other area. While “Managing Stress” and “Balancing Responsibilities” were the two areas rated lowest on both the Pre- and Post-Test, these same two areas showed the second and third highest amount of overall increase. This seems to indicate that while families may struggle with managing stress and balancing responsibilities, they found the program to be the most helpful in improving family relations in these topic areas.

When asked to list as many one-word descriptors of each of their children that they were able to think of, respondents listed more positive traits and fewer negative ones on the Post-Test than on the Pre-Test. For the small number of individuals that accounted for the change, the amount of change seemed striking, indicating that for these participants, the program resulted in more thoughtful appreciation of their children’s qualities.

In another section, participants gave long, thoughtful responses detailing how they now appreciated other members of their families. One recounted that now she was playing the role of mother, she understood and appreciated her own mother much more. Another mentioned that he more greatly valued his wife and the role she plays in the family. Another mentioned making efforts to be a good parent because she wanted a long term, positive relationship with her children.

I took the class with my Mom. Now, I can see things from her point of view, and issues she went through when I was a child. As an adult, I can understand her struggles now more. I appreciate what she had to go through.

Adult Efforts to Build Stronger Families

Not only did families show higher satisfaction with certain aspects of family life after completing the Building Strong Families series, but they talked about making a pointed effort to have better quality communication and to spend more time together. Notably, the area “Solving conflict in a positive way” had the greatest increase in reported time spent.

I learned that it's okay to say 'no,' and okay to allow kids to have some control and choices in the house, because they are little and they will someday have to make choices. Before, they called me a "drill sergeant." Now, I give behavioral choices.

The ways that adults purposefully went about the work of strengthening their families showed up in a myriad of ways. The efforts they reported included spending time encouraging, listening, and talking to one another, and being more positive in interaction and discipline, providing good role models. Additional efforts included making efforts to make children and other family members feel valued and loved, and becoming more thoughtful about their child’s developmental stage and how it relates to the child’s behavior and appropriate discipline. Not surprisingly, adults described all of these efforts as resulting in increasingly peaceful households.

Since being in Building Strong Families, the kids and I have come to understand each other.

One respondent summed up her efforts:

I actively look for things to be a better mom. I want a good relationship with my children my entire life.

Finally, participation in the Building Strong Families program not only resulted in families making specific, concerted change efforts, but seemed to buttress their confidence going forward. One respondent said she felt much more confident about her parenting, and another that she found the series to be a good support group as she found it helpful to know that other people were facing the same issues. Another mentioned that she still refers to the class materials. Yet another said she felt she now had a support she did not have previously, because now that she had taken the class, she would not hesitate to contact the facilitator if it would be helpful in the future.

Conclusion

A great class, very well done. I recommended it to other people.

The Building Strong Families program was well-liked, with adults reporting an overwhelmingly positive experience. Even a year later during a follow-up telephone call, nearly every adult contacted used the term “excited” to describe their anticipation in participating in the program and learning new things about how to build a stronger family. Even after a year had elapsed, adults were still very positive in describing the impacts of the program and specific changes they saw in themselves or in the way their families interacted.

I was hungry to get back to the next session of the class

I was excited. Class was something I looked forward to.

Since the class, we all communicate and understand each other better.

The personality of the facilitator himself, as indicated by a number of spontaneous comments, was an aspect of the workshops that contributed to the success of the Building Strong Families series. First, he was instrumental in their participation, as several enrolled in the series as a result of their personal acquaintance with him. Secondly, they vividly recalled his skillfully relation of stories from his own childhood to illustrate class points. They described these narratives as helping them retain the information from the workshops, recalling these lessons in their own parenting. It was clear they felt that the facilitator was well-appreciated and approachable. One respondent emphasized: “*I know where the facilitator works, and if I needed to call him (with a parenting issue), I wouldn't hesitate.*”

As a result of their learning and resulting efforts, the most important changes the adults had seen in their families were:

- increased satisfaction with relationships
- their families were doing better at helping out, communicating, and getting along together

- valuing their children and families and the relationships they had with them.

I had no idea there was that many ways you could build a strong family!

Time and again, the adults reiterated that they had really come to value the importance of a strong family. They alluded to newfound insight as to child development and how that affected their thinking about what to expect of their children. They noted using more positive discipline and better outcomes as a result of the program. After their experience, participants referred others to the program and helped friends and relatives use the information they learned with those families.

Sometimes my friends ask for advice, and now I am more able to give it. They say, "Wow, it does work!"

One respondent summed up the program:

If a couple could take these classes together, it would be wonderful.

Implications for Future Adult Programs and Research

Everyone mentioned that part of their reasons for attending the program was that they valued parenting skills and family relationships. Because participation in the Building Strong Families program came through acquaintance with the presenter or other social service agencies, marketing the program through partnering agencies in the future might continue to be the most effective way to involve participants.

The research helps us identify areas of concern for families and areas where the program was most helpful. "Balancing Responsibilities" seems to be an area adults are most dissatisfied with, even at the conclusion of the program. Yet, they showed the greatest increase in satisfaction in this area. The areas of "Managing Stress" and "Kids and Self-Esteem" also showed improvement, indicating that families found these aspects of the program to be helpful. Communication surrounding conflict resolution was another area in which respondents related having the most difficulty, and that were the most appreciated of the workshops. Findings here suggest that other audiences might also find these topic areas to be the most helpful in the future and that Balancing Responsibilities and Communicating in particular should be chosen as part of the core series if not all topics are to be presented.

The research format used in this study, particularly asking open-ended questions and using a follow up telephone interview, allowed respondents to share rich insights about the program. Respondents also had had a year in which to reflect on the program and to implement changes in their families. Implications for future research include asking respondents for contact data for relatives or friends for greater success in making contact for follow-up interviews after the cessation of the program.

Participants were very complimentary to the program and had only one suggestion for improvement. Several respondents noted that a detractor to the program was participants who seemed to be there involuntarily, and so program facilitators might do well to consider having sessions that are separate for the participants who may be there involuntarily, to result in a

more positive experience for those who participate in the class completely of their own accord, and not present as a result of their experiences with the family court system.

Elements of the class that participants particularly enjoyed and found most memorable was the presenter and his skillful relation of aspects of his childhood to illustrate class points. Several times, they mentioned how impactful they found the facilitator's use of personal examples from his own childhood to be to them. Their vivid memories of the workshop helped them use the information to improve relationships in their own families. In future programs, the use of highly skilled facilitators will likely contribute to the success of and enthusiasm of the participants towards the program, and facilitators should be encouraged to share relevant and appropriate narratives.

Participants enjoyed learning new ways of thinking about and working with their families, especially through the interactive, hands-on nature of the program and variety of the subject matter. The fact that the youth program was offered at the same time, along with dinner, was particularly appreciated and made attendance possible for several as childcare and the evening meal were not a barrier to participation, indicating that future programs should continue providing these same successful elements: interactive learning, an evening meal, and a concurrent youth program.

What mother wouldn't look forward to having kids entertained and fed at the same time!

It was great to have a meal and the kids program. It was all taken care of, and we didn't have to rush around.

I learned that it is never too late to shape your children. And, I also learned to enjoy your children and life and relax instead of rushing through it.

I hope most people know how important it is to be a strong family!