

ATTACHMENT

FAST: Multi-Family Groups to Empower Parents

Families and Schools Together: Evidence Based Positive Parenting Model

FAST is positive parenting group model, based on community organizing. Offered at schools, the multi-family groups are offered to all children of a specific grade level, generally after school. It is recommended for the transition year into a new school building, to proactively build support networks for the parents and reduce the stress for the child entering a new building. New brain research on stress suggests that entering into a new school pushes the stress levels up for a child, and high stress levels reduce capacity to learn and integrate new information. 8 weekly group meetings aim to build social capital and positive relationships around each child, including with the family (the parent child bond), across families of same aged children, and with the family, school and community. This multi-systemic approach is based on the social ecological theory of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which argues that micro and macro relationships directly and indirectly influence each child's well being. The parent child bond, as well as the community relationships with the primary caretaker, are critical to a child's functioning. By increasing social support for parents and the social capital in the community and at the schools (Coleman; Putnam), improved child and family and community outcomes can be achieved. FAST has been proven in rigorous experimental studies (Abt study, 2001; Kratochwill, et al, 2004; McDonald, et al, 2006; Kratochwill, et al, submitted).

FAST has three stages: outreach and engagement with home visits to invite parents to bring their families: eight weekly group sessions led by a trained team of parents and professionals to build stronger relationships; two years of parent-led, monthly group sessions to maintain relationships in families, across families, and with schools and communities. Groups meet for 2 ½ hours, and the trained team supports the parents as they repeatedly practice carrying out positive parenting activities, rather than teaching in lectures or with films. Parents practice

taking charge of their own family, giving commands, and leading them in fun interactions. Parents also practice giving their child “responsive play time” in which the child takes charge during a 15 minutes of free play time, and the parent is coached by the team to be responsive to the child’s initiations, and blocked from criticizing, being intrusive, or bossy. Each family activity has experiential learning embedded in it, based on family stress theory, family systems, and mental health research. There are no literacy requirements, and this approach has been successful with highly educated parents as well as parents with no literacy in English or any literacy. This approach has a track record for engaging “hard to reach”, e.g. immigrant, refugee families, families with English as a second language, and socially excluded or marginalized families.

Each local team is trained within a workforce development and service development approach, for the job-training and supervision. With nearly 20 years of experience, capacity can be built within 4 months in a new community school. In that time, the team will be trained and have planned the group, have recruited 30 families, have implemented and adapted the group, and have developed trusting relationships with one another. The teams are trained to recruit parents into the groups by doing homevisits, using tested research based strategies that have been proven to engage socially excluded, vulnerable families in 7 countries. Then they are supervised to implement the 8 weekly group sessions with a manual and with supervision. The certified FAST Trainer will support and coach the novice team, including 3 site visits with direct observation of the groups, and will be available for technical assistance. Training includes 6 days over a 4 month period, e.g. reviewing program integrity checklists, reading and reviewing the program manual, and at the end, reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence based practice they have learned. The workforce development is achieved through a planning, doing and reviewing training model;

training of the team for 6 days over 4 months includes the actual facilitation of 8 weekly, multi-family group sessions.

There is a lot of room for adaptation to make FAST groups work to fit local community settings and be responsive to local issues of parents and youth. Parents would be paid full time to be part of each planning team and contribute to the 60% of local adaptations of the process. Teams are encouraged by their certified FAST trainer to be creative and to share together and use their different kinds of knowledge: cultural knowledge, local knowledge, age specific knowledge, parenting knowledge, and professional knowledge. 60% of FAST can be changed without diminishing the average retention rates (80% of those who come once, complete at least 6 of 8 sessions) and the 25% average improvements in child outcomes, reported by parents and teachers. But, 40% must be maintained as core-components of the group processes; the certified FAST trainer monitors the 40% for quality assurance, with program integrity checklists.

A grassroots, group work approach, FAST was developed by a social worker in a specific community 20 years ago. In addition to being able to provide local full time jobs for parents of children in schools, there are multiple benefits to implementing this approach community organizing approach in a local school and community:

- 1) increased child strengths at school, home and community
- 2) decreased child problems at school, home and community
- 3) decreased school drop out
- 4) decreased substance abuse
- 5) decreased juvenile crime
- 6) decrease child mental health problems
- 7) increased parent-child bonds

- 8) increased family cohesion
- 9) empowered small groups of parents
- 10) increased parent leadership at home and in communities
- 11) increased parent involvement in schools
- 12) increased social capital in communities
- 13) decreased stress and conflict in child and families
- 14) decreased child abuse and neglect

Since then, the group approach has been refined and improved with parent and practitioner feedback, with monitoring of retention rates, and refined with new research. The average retention rate of parents and families, if they come once, is 80%. Parents vote with their feet, in a voluntary approach. This high rate has held for 20 years across 1000 schools in 8 countries, including rural and urban, with families from very poor backgrounds, all ethnicities, and middle class too.

Based on anti-oppressive values, the community development principles of shifting power from institutions and professionals to small local groups of parents takes place in 3 stages:

- 1) personal outreach to homes and spending time connecting one to one with a parent, to recruit parents who might be considered hard to reach;
- 2) teams of professionals and local parents (80% service users/parents who reflect the local school and community in culture, language, religion and education level) facilitate eight weekly meetings based on activities and talking, with the goals of building relationships in families and in small groups; empower small groups of interdependent parents in local communities; and
- 3) support the small groups of connected, empowered parents to plan FAST graduation, and then to run local monthly multi-family groups; training provided for parent leadership, and a small budget, space provision and other supports from Children's Centers, schools and local authorities would be provided.

FAST is values based and evidence based. The group program has been tested with 4 randomized controlled trials, showing positive benefits to child well-being, academic success, parent-child bonds, and family support networks with other families, schools and communities. FAST is included in several lists of evidence based practices in US (CMHS Report on 12 models, 2007; OJJDP exemplary status 2006; Harvard School of Education list of 13 evidence based family strengthening models 2006; SAMHSA list of prevention models, 2003).

This universal approach invites all parents and children of a particular level at a particular school to attend after school groups to enhance their child's academic success. FAST is theory based, research based, and values based (McDonald, et al, 1997; McDonald and Sayger; 1998; Kratochwill et al, 2004; McDonald et al, 2006).

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