
**Families and Schools Together (FAST):
An Evaluation of Program Effectiveness
with Elementary School Children**



**Safe Schools
Healthy Students**

Pinellas County School District
Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative
Evaluation Report #207-2
Prepared by the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute

Suggested Citation:

Perry, A., Massey, O., & Armstrong, K. (2002). *Families and Schools Together (FAST): An Evaluation of Program Effectiveness with Elementary School Children*. Tampa, FL: The Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, University of South Florida. FMHI Publication #207-2. Second in the Series "Evaluation of the Pinellas County Safe Schools/ Healthy Students Initiative".

A special thanks to the staff and faculty of the Pinellas County School System for their assistance and support in the completion of evaluation activities associated with the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative.

**Ralph Bailey, Ph.D., Supervisor, Psychological Services
Nancy Deane, SS/HSI Project Manager**

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**Angela Perry, B.A.
Oliver T. Massey, Ph.D.
Kathleen Armstrong, Ph.D.**

University of South Florida

**Pinellas County School District
Safe School Healthy Students Initiative**

Prepared by the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute
University of South Florida, 13301 Bruce B. Downs Blvd.
Tampa, FL 33612-3807



Executive Summary

Families and Schools Together (FAST): An Evaluation of Program

Effectiveness with Elementary School Children

Families and Schools Together (FAST.) is designed to intervene early in the development of at-risk children in order to strengthen child and family resources. A total of 78 families were served during the Fall of 1999 and the Spring of 2000 in the eight week program. Several locally developed and standardized instruments were used to assess outcomes for student participants and their families. Significant improvements were found on a comparison of pretest-posttest measures of family cohesiveness, formal and informal connections, and personal assets. These results suggest family activities increased due to program participation. Parents also reported more involvement in school related activities. Overall, parent satisfaction with the program was high, with parents reporting that they felt the program helped improve parenting skills and strengthened family relationships.

Families and Schools Together (FAST):
An Evaluation of Program Effectiveness with Elementary
School Children Preliminary Evaluation

Introduction

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is a multi-faceted program to help children succeed in school and prevent violence and the development of juvenile delinquency (McDonald, 1989). FAST has been identified as a model program by the Center for Mental Health Services based on research evidence of its effectiveness in reducing juvenile delinquency (CMHS, 1999). Funded by the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative (SS/HSI), FAST is a collaborative project between Pinellas County Schools and a local mental health provider.

FAST was designed to intervene early in the development of at-risk children in order to strengthen the resources within the child and the family. FAST is supported by national evaluation data that documents improvement in classroom behaviors, home behaviors, self-esteem, family closeness, social connections, and parental involvement in school (McDonald & Frey, 1998).

In the FAST program, families attend structured experiences over the course of eight weeks. These experiences are co-led by a mental health professional and a parent and include six elements: a meal shared as a family unit, couples time, communication games played at the meal table, a parent support group, one-to-one play time for parents and children, and a lottery that selects the family to host the next meeting. Incentives are provided to families to attend sessions including childcare, meals, and other prizes.

Transportation is provided to and from FAST meetings when needed. Currently, FAST operates in six elementary schools in Pinellas County.

Method

Families enter the FAST program either by self-referral or based on the recommendation of their child's teacher. Teachers may nominate students for participation based on behavior problems or poor academic achievement.

A trained interviewer meets with a family in their home to explain the program, obtain consent for participation, and collect pretest information. The interviewer is accompanied by at least one parent-partner who is a former FAST graduate (McDonald, 1989; Alliance for Children and Families, 2000) in order to empower families and increase the likelihood of program participation.

Following completion of the program, teachers are asked to complete a satisfaction measure and parents complete posttest instruments and a satisfaction measure. Families then graduate to FASTWORKS, which provides support through two years of follow-up meetings. FASTWORKS is designed to help families maintain their progress and empowers them to become advocates for their children.

Instruments

While the national FAST program utilized several standardized scales for evaluation purposes, Pinellas County selected one of those instruments for their program: the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scales III (FACES III) (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1986). This is a 20-item instrument consisting of two scales used to assess the level of cohesion and adaptability within the family. Parents rate items on a 5-point likert scale from almost never (1) to almost always (5). Sample items from the Cohesion Scale

include “Family members ask each other for help,” and “We can easily think of something to do together.” Sample items from the Adaptability Scale include: “Family members ask each other for help,” and “In solving problems, children’s suggestions are followed.” These items are designed to rate the family’s ability to change and the degree to which family members feel connected to each other.

Pinellas County FAST also utilized additional instruments including the Parental Involvement and Family Support Survey (PIFS), the Community Connections Survey (CCS), and the Parent Satisfaction Survey. The PIFS includes five sets of questions created by the Family Service Center to assess the parents’ level of involvement with their child, their school, and their community. For purposes of the evaluation, three sets of questions were utilized. These sets of questions dealt with the parents’ participation in school-related functions, the parents’ participation in activities with their child, and perceived family support. Sample questions include: “Have you or your spouse attended a parent-teacher conference this year?” “How many times in a normal week does some household member read with or to your child?” and “When I run into a problem taking care of my children, I have a lot of people to whom I can talk to get help or advice.”

The CCS was designed to assess the parents’ level of connection with the community. Three domains assess the parents’ level of participation in the community and knowledge and use of community resources. These domains include Informal Connections (8 items), Formal Connections (11 items), and Personal Assets (7 items). Informal Connections dealt with spending time with family members in the community. An example is: “I spend leisure time with my family.” Formal connections dealt with the parents’ participation in organizations in the community such as a crime watch

program, the PTA, or neighborhood association meetings. An example is: “I belong to civic/cultural groups.” The Personal Assets domain dealt with the parents’ perception of supports among family, friends and the community. An example is: “I feel connected and involved in my community.” All items on the CCS are answered with a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (always).

The Parent Satisfaction Survey was designed to measure parents’ satisfaction with the program and includes six items. Sample items include: “Special play helps strengthen the parent-child bond” and “FAST activities reinforce parents as head of the family.” A copy of each instrument is provided in the Appendix.

Results

Demographics

A total of seventy-eight families participated in FAST from Spring to Fall of 2000, and of those, data was available for seventy-four of the children. These children ranged in age from 4 to 13 years old, and were mostly males (58%), and Caucasian (59%). Eighty percent of the children received free and reduced lunch (an indicator of poverty), and 20% received special education services (see Table 1).

Pretest-Posttest Evaluation Findings

For each instrument used in the evaluation, scores for questions comprising the subscales were added to produce a subscale score. Matched pairs *t*-tests were then performed to test for significant change over time.

The FACES III included two subscales, Family Cohesiveness and Adaptability. Analysis of the pretest and posttest scores of the two subscales of the FACES III indicated that parents reported significant improvement on the Family Cohesiveness

scale, $t(76) = -3.709$, $p < .001$, indicating an increase in family closeness during the eight weeks of program participation. No significant differences were found for the Adaptability scale.

Three sets of questions were analyzed on the PIFS. Paired sample t -tests were conducted for questions dealing with parent-child activities and family support. A significant increase was found for parent-child activities, $t(74) = 2.709$, $p < .01$, an indicator that parents had increased activity time with their child. No significant change was found on the measure of family support.

Questions related to family participation in school activities are provided in Table 2. More parents reported participating in school-related activities. Small increases were found for parent participation with regard to membership in parent-teacher organizations, while larger increases were seen for “belonging to other school organizations.” Unfortunately, with the exception of attending parent conferences, less than half of the parents indicated that they participated in school-related activities.

The three scales of the CCS were also analyzed for change over time. Significant improvements were found in informal connections, $t(73) = -2.22$, $p < .05$, formal connections, $t(69) = 4.05$, $p < .01$, and personal assets, $t(68) = -3.82$, $p < .01$. These results suggest that the families participating in the FAST program increased their participation in neighborhood and community activities.

Satisfaction

Over forty percent of parents reported overall satisfaction with the FAST program, especially with regards to improving parent skills and strengthening their

family. Slightly over half (57%) reported an improvement in their child's grades at school following the intervention (see Table 3).

Discussion

Early to middle childhood is recognized as a key stage in the development of aggressive and violent behavior. Research evidence supports the effectiveness of prevention programs that involve parents, school, and the community (Elliot, 1998). Healthy family relationships and family involvement in school are key factors in a child's academic success as well as predictors of later adult adjustment (Resnick et. al. 1998). Further, families who know how to access resources within their community are better able to provide the support and guidance needed to promote healthy childhood development (Alliance for Children and Families, 2000).

FAST was designed to serve at-risk children and their families with the goal of preventing school failure and juvenile delinquency. Consistent with the research base, the program concentrates its efforts in parent training and community involvement to build parenting skills and increase parental involvement in school. Parents with better parenting skills are better equipped to provide their children with the care and nurturing that they need to develop successfully. Parents who are more closely involved with their children's school help promote academic achievement and improve school outcomes.

The children and families served by FAST in Pinellas County represent a diverse group with multiple risk factors, including poverty and educational challenges. The data from parents after participating in eight weeks of FAST showed improved family cohesiveness, family participation in school, and family connections to the community.

Parents also reported a high level of satisfaction with the FAST program. These results suggest that the program has accomplished its objectives.

These findings, however, must be tempered by acknowledging the limitations of the current study. The limitations of the simple pretest-posttest research design without a comparison group and the lack of behavioral measures prevent a more definitive statement about program impact. There may be alternative explanations for the improvements demonstrated in the current study, including activities occurring in the school or community unrelated to the program itself. At the present time, the effect of the program on student grades and classroom behavior has not been addressed. Future investigations may shed light on possible improvements in classroom behavior. Nevertheless, the results suggest that the FAST program offers promise in positively affecting family relationships that may impact children's success in school.

Future Directions

For the future, it is recommended that the Pinellas FAST team utilize additional measures to document effectiveness of this program, including individual measures of child behavior at home and at school, and child self-esteem. For replication and comparison purposes with the national model, it is recommended that the instruments used in the national model program be adopted for use in Pinellas County. In addition, obtaining follow-up data to document continued improvement and maintenance of gains is suggested to strengthen the efficacy of the evaluation. Finally, where feasible, it is recommended that the district include a control group of students who do not receive the FAST program for whom pretest and posttest measures are collected. Such a research

design would ensure that the noted program gains are not due to maturational factors of the child, nor due to unrelated program efforts to which the children have been exposed.

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Table 1
Demographics of Child Participants (N=74)

Variable	Number	Percent
Gender		
Male	43	58
Female	31	42
Race		
White, Non-Hispanic	44	59
African American, Non-Hispanic	25	34
Hispanic	3	4
Asian	1	1.4
Other	1	1.4
Free & Reduced Lunch	59	80
Retained in Grade	4	5
Special Education	15	20
Family Composition		
Parent(s)	67	90
Guardian	7	10

Table 2

Pre-post Comparison of Parent “Yes” Responses to PIFS Survey (N=78)

Survey Item	Percentage of Parents Answering “Yes”	
	Pretest	Posttest
Attend parent/teacher conferences	74	86
Belong to a parent/teacher organization	20.5	27
Attend meetings of parent/teacher organizations	46	47
Take part in activities or parent/teacher organizations	29.5	44
Belong to other organizations dealing with school matters	16.7	41

Table 3

Parent Responses to Satisfaction Survey (N=77)

Survey Item	Percent in Agreement
Special play strengthens parent-child bond	99
FAST activities reinforce parent as head of family	91
Buddy –time helps reduce parental stress and isolation	94
FAST activities help to improve relationships between family members	96
FAST activities help to develop good parenting skills	94
Referred child’s grades improved	57