

Engaging Families in Boys & Girls Clubs: An Evaluation of the Family PLUS Pilot Initiative

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Abstract

Research has shown that engaging families through youth development and after-school programs may benefit children. This paper extends knowledge in this arena, describing a set of strategies for implementing family-strengthening activities in youth development settings. The paper reports findings from a pilot evaluation of the Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Family PLUS initiative. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected in the form of surveys, phone interviews, and focus groups with club leaders, parents, and youth. Results uncover emerging family support strategies that actively link school, club, and family; culturally tailor programming; foster long-term and family-friendly staff; place children at the center of family programming; and pair family-strengthening activities with other types of programming. The paper also reports on the obstacles such strategies address as well as initial evidence of the positive influence of such programming on parent-child relationships, parent development, and parent-staff relationships. Implications for future research are discussed.

Key Words: Boys and Girls Clubs, afterschool, youth development, engagement, involvement, families, evaluation, family, PLUS, initiative, pilot, staff, programs, out-of-school time, after-school, relationships, activities

Introduction

Four decades of research contribute to our understanding of family engagement in schooling and its benefits for children (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

However, much less is known about engaging and supporting families in youth development contexts, such as the strategies by which organizations engage families and the benefits it may confer. Yet youth development and after-school programs are increasingly prevalent contexts in which children and youth develop. Over 6.5 million of the nation's children and youth are in after-school programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2004), and nearly a million school-age children participate in structured after-school programs and activities under the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers program (Naftzger, Kaufman, Margolin, & Ali, 2006). Below, we examine family strengthening and engagement in this increasingly prevalent developmental context and identify promising strategies for increasing such engagement.

The nascent body of evidence that does exist on engaging families through youth development and after-school programs suggests that such efforts can benefit children and youth. Research and evaluation studies show that family engagement after school leads to increased family involvement in children's education and school, better academic performance among children, improved implementation and outcomes for after-school programs, and improved relationships between parents and schools (Bennett, 2004; Horowitz & Bronte-Tinkew, 2007; Kakli, Kreider, Little, Buck, & Coffey, 2006). Programs with a family component delivered through Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) show equally promising results (James & Partee, n.d.; St. Pierre, Mark, Kaltreider, & Aiken, 1997). Family strengthening and engagement after school also improves relationships between parents and children—increasing parent-child closeness and trust, reducing conflict, and promoting greater understanding and involvement in children's schoolwork (Harris & Wimer, 2004; Intercultural Center for Research in Education, 2005; Massachusetts 2020, 2004).

Yet families and programs face numerous challenges to implementing family strengthening and engagement efforts. Parents' work schedules and time constraints, transportation and child care needs, family culture and language, and residence outside of the neighborhood create obstacles to family engagement (Debord, Martin, & Mallilo, 1996; Weiss & Brigham, 2003). Inadequate staffing and funding as well as negative staff attitudes towards families or an overall unwelcoming atmosphere prevent some programs from effectively attracting families (Intercultural Center for Research in Education, 2005; James & Partee, n.d.; Robinson & Fenwick, 2007; Weiss & Brigham, 2003).

Research has begun to map out strategies that after-school and youth development programs use to engage families, including supporting families, communicating and building trust, hiring and developing a family-focused staff, and building linkages across individuals and organizations (Kakli et al.,

2006). This paper confirms and extends knowledge in this field with findings from a pilot evaluation of BGCA's Family PLUS (Parents Leading, Uniting, Serving) initiative. The evaluation reveals promising strategies for implementing family strengthening activities in clubs across the U.S., how these strategies help overcome programmatic obstacles, and how such efforts may positively influence relationships between parents and children.

Method

In partnership with the Kimberly-Clark Corporation and after a year of careful planning with a committee of national advisors, BGCA launched Family PLUS in 2006, representing a major initiative to strengthen families. This revised family-strengthening initiative and strategy built off of earlier success and identified five key components of family strengthening on which to focus: outreach strategies, father/male involvement, economic opportunity, kinship care, and the FAN Club (an evidence-based family support program).

With the goal of integrating Family PLUS into clubs nationwide over five years, the initiative has given seed grants to several dozen clubs since 2006 through a grant application and review process. BGCA provides these clubs with implementation support through grant funds, a guidebook, a Family PLUS web site, a National Family Support Symposium, site-based training, and ongoing technical assistance. The aim of these supports is to increase family strengthening activities within clubs and, ultimately, to positively impact a sense of family togetherness among club youth and their families.

This paper presents select findings from a pilot evaluation of the first two years of Family PLUS implementation (2006-2007). Specifically, Sociometrics conducted a mixed method evaluation of the capacity building, implementation, and initial outcomes of the Family PLUS initiative. Evaluation measures included a 2007 symposium participant exit survey and follow-up survey six weeks later ($n = 102$ and 78 , respectively), surveys and interviews with leaders from Boys & Girls Clubs with Family PLUS grants ($n = 29$ and 21 , respectively), a parent/caregiver survey ($n = 175$), two parent/caregiver focus groups ($n = 4$ each), two youth focus groups (one group with 9–12 year olds and another with 13–18 year olds, $n = 8$ and 7 , respectively), one club site visit, and review of quarterly reports from clubs with Family PLUS funding.

The club chosen for a site visit during this first phase of the evaluation was selected based on its receipt of Family PLUS grant funding, its history as a well-established club, and the depth and range of its family engagement activities. Specifically, the selected club has a unique approach to engaging families, requiring a minimum number of family volunteer hours and meeting attendance

for each child enrolled in the club, assuring high levels of parental presence and engagement in the club. The youth focus groups were conducted during this site visit with youth recruited by request of club staff and with selection criteria consisting only of age parameters mentioned above, youth interest, and parental consent. Parent/caregiver focus groups were conducted both during the site visit as well as during a national family support symposium, with group participants recruited by evaluators and club staff based on their interest and familial ties to one or more children currently enrolled in a club. Finally, all leaders of clubs with Family PLUS grants during 2006 and 2007 were invited to participate in the club leader survey and to help gather completed surveys from 10 parents at their club. A random sample of these club leaders were also contacted by phone for follow-up interviews.

This paper draws primarily from qualitative data from interviews and focus groups and highlights evaluation findings related to overarching strategies used by clubs to deliver family-strengthening programming, common barriers to such programming, and resultant parent–child outcomes.

Results

Qualitative and quantitative data from the pilot evaluation of Family PLUS revealed a number of implementation strategies for strengthening families in the club context that were both innovative and addressed common challenges faced in working with families. Findings from multiple data sources also begin to suggest the positive outcomes of family strengthening activities for children, families, and clubs.

Family Engagement Implementation Strategies

Through the initial evaluation, several promising strategies for implementing family strengthening and engagement activities were uncovered that informed the design and delivery of Family PLUS programming and worked to overcome common challenges faced by clubs. The Family PLUS activities whose design and delivery was facilitated through these strategies ranged from social activities such as family bingo night, movie night, Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, and parent social nights; to courses and workshops focused on parenting, adult education, and enrichment (e.g., ESL, computer, nutritional cooking, family involvement in education); to other services for children and families, such as dental services, tax preparation, child developmental screening, and holiday gift/food drives. These categories of activities held true across club leader, parent, and youth reports. According to the parent/caregiver survey, the vast majority of parents participated in one or more Family PLUS

events over the six months prior to the survey (1 event = 18%, 2–3 events = 39%; 4–5 events = 13%, and 6 or more events = 18%).

The most common barriers to implementing these activities—as reported in the symposium exit and follow-up surveys and through the club leader surveys and interviews—included limited amounts of funding (reported by 52% of symposium attendees), limited staffing (reported by 34%), and need for staff training (28%), as well as outreach barriers. Other barriers mentioned were lack of interest from the communities and families themselves, local preferences for programming that didn't focus on families, language barriers in predominantly Latino communities, and lack of support from schools.

Strategies for delivering the above-mentioned activities and overcoming implementation challenges included actively linking schools, clubs, and families; culturally tailoring programming; designating long-term staff with a family-friendly mindset; shifting staff perspectives through shared responsibilities; and pairing family-focused efforts with other targeted programming for outreach and sustainability, as described below.

Linking Schools, Clubs, and Families

Club leaders spoke of linking families, schools, and clubs, which in turn helped address outreach and funding challenges. Club leaders viewed themselves as experts in forming positive relationships with families and youth and collaborating with outside agencies. But schools bring added access to new parents through groups like the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). One club brought together the best of both worlds to better serve youth by hosting family social nights in a middle school, piggybacking off of school PTA meetings. This encouraged PTA parents¹ to enroll their children in the club and club parents to get involved in the PTA. Eventually, other parents with children in the school were also drawn in for these double meetings.

Other clubs worked directly with school staff around children's school readiness and behavioral issues; with youth and families via homework help and guidance on parent involvement; and with school leadership to establish shared space and objectives. For example, one urban club housed a charter high school, providing the club with substantial unrestricted revenue each year through rental income. The club's parents and youth enjoyed first priority for coveted school enrollment. Families enjoyed club staff's motivational influence on and information about children's school performance. Parents, school staff, and club staff also benefited from mutual expectations about parent volunteering (which was required at both the club and the school).

Tailoring Programming to the Local Community and Cultural Background of Families

In surveys and interviews, club leaders cited language and cultural barriers to engaging families in their family support program. For example, cultural barriers were among the top four barriers cited by symposium attendees. Reaching out to Latino families and undocumented families, in particular, was a repeated theme in interview questions about implementation challenges. For example, conducting background checks to allow undocumented family members to volunteer is a challenge, especially for clubs with a volunteering requirement. To increase outreach to and engagement of Latino and undocumented families, clubs leaders identified community groups who could “adopt a family” to serve their required volunteer time, used alternative background check services that require only a name and address (rather than a social security number), and hired staff who shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds with targeted families.

Likewise, for some clubs, issues of locality and socioeconomic status presented challenges for family programming, for example in designing events that appeal to both affluent and low-income families in a community or adapting workshops for use in suburban versus more urban sites. One club bridged the economic divide in its community by offering food-centered family social nights, international celebrations, and events that showcased the good work of children, thereby appealing to all families.

Designating a Long-Term Staff Person with a Family Support Mindset

Staffing and funding problems were frequently cited as barriers to sustained family engagement activities. Several club leaders spoke of a prior grant that funded a designated person with primary responsibility for family support programming, but the position disappeared when the funding ended. Others found different types of funding to support the stability of such a position in combination with other roles, such as preschool director or individual services provider. Persons in such positions also sometimes continued to informally function in a parent liaison capacity even after their job description no longer formally called for it. Club leaders also spoke about the importance of having a family support coordinator with a mindset and passion for family inclusion, which they sometimes found in professionals with a social work background. In the absence of a long-term designated staff person, clubs also spread responsibility for family programming across staff and/or through the use of parent volunteers and parent advisory committees.

Placing Children at the Center of Programming

According to club leader interviews, many staff members place youth at the center of their work and find it hard to include families for fear of detracting from their core value of focusing on children and youth. One club leader explained how they kept youth at the center of family programming by showcasing youth talent and letting parents be a part of that. Many others hosted periodic family nights as a social activity geared toward all family members rather than just adult caregivers. Other club leaders focused directly on shifting staff perspectives by discussing and modeling the purpose, concept, and importance of Family PLUS. Beyond this, club leaders also spread the responsibility and ownership of family programming across staff to increase their appreciation of families. For example, at one club staff members took turns hosting a monthly family night at the club, giving each staff member an opportunity for closer relationships with families.

Pairing Family Support Activities With Other Types of Programming

Pairing family support activities with other types of programming, namely preschool and prevention programs, also helped overcome funding and outreach issues. As an example, consider one club in which family outreach really took off with a free preschool program for low-income families. The preschool program engaged parents as volunteers and had regular communication with families during drop off and pick up. Building off of this success, the club now offers activities and services for preschool families and beyond including educational and health counseling and a teen parent support group. The club's preschool leader noted that teaching young children successfully in the preschool classroom requires that parents support similar behaviors at home. The common mindset in early childhood education of educating the "whole" child and viewing the child as part of the broader family system may also make club-based preschool programs an ideal entry point for family support programming. Developmentally, a strong family component in the early years may prime both parents and children for family support and involvement moving forward (Kreider, 2001). Similarly, other clubs mentioned prevention programs on which their family support work was built.

Benefits

Albeit preliminary, positive outcomes were a persistent finding across parent, youth, and club leader reports, via both quantitative and qualitative data. Family togetherness, and especially parent-child relationships, were improved both in terms of the time spent with one another and the quality of that time. In addition, parents reported benefiting directly as individuals in their role as

parents and beyond as a result of Family PLUS programming, and club leaders reported multiple improvements to parent–staff relationships.

Parent–Child Relationships

The vast majority of club leaders, parents, and youth reported a positive influence of Family PLUS on parent–child relationships, meaning the quality and quantity of time that children and parents spent together. For example, on the parent/caregiver survey, the combined mean rating on a scale measuring family relations and cohesion² (Tolan, n.d.) improved from an average of 3.18 before the grant period to 3.50 after the grant period, which was a statistically significant result.

Interestingly, qualitative data across informants suggests processes by which parent–child relationships are improved. For example, parents and youth described how parental presence in a club increased parental knowledge about their children’s talents and friendship networks, provided information on which to base meaningful conversations with their children, and presented opportunities for parents and children to have fun with one another and for parents to model a strong work ethic. For example, one teenage boy talked about his skills at playing pool and public speaking, talents his mom would have never seen if she hadn’t volunteered at the club. Youth award ceremonies and competitive events hosted by clubs also facilitated parental awareness and celebration of youth talents.

Likewise, several youth agreed that their parents knew who all their friends were because of parental presence in the club. These were not necessarily friends who lived in their neighborhood or attended the same school but with whom the youth spent a lot of time and clearly had close bonds. These introductions meant that parents were more likely to approve of out-of-club visits between friends and that youth felt their parents knew more and important things about them—like how they interact with their friends. Note that this may be exceptionally important given the research literature on parental monitoring in adolescence as a predictor of positive academic and social-emotional outcomes (Kreider & Suizzo, 2009).

Parent Development

Parents reported deriving individual benefits from Family PLUS programming in their role as parents and beyond. First, the majority of parents described feeling emotionally and practically supported by the clubs, for example, recounting how club staff members helped them hang sheetrock in a family kitchen, escorted an inebriated father to the hospital, and helped locate housing and employment. Parents also pointed to the respect, listening, and

kind suggestions they received from staff. As one mother put it, “It’s all about relationships with staff.”

Several parents also described feeling assured by the safe environment in which their children spent time. A leader from one urban club explained that gang activity exists in the neighborhood, but the club is considered sacred ground among all in the community and has a strong relationship with the police and sheriff’s department. Parents at this club explained that just knowing their children were spending time in the safety of a high quality club offered valuable peace of mind and was a powerful family support in and of itself.

Some parents reported an increased sense of economic empowerment as well. A single mother with two school-age boys living in a small town spoke eloquently of the importance of the economic supports her club provided, including distribution of food, school supplies, and Christmas toys, as well as housing referrals. Clubs also provided employment and training for parents, for example, implementing the Youth Establishing Savings (YES) program, which offered (among other things) financial literacy workshops to youth and families and matching funds to incentivize financial savings.

In addition, a few parents credited clubs with fostering a sense of community and civic engagement. Parents described volunteering in the community as a result of their positive experiences with the club, for example helping with a neighborhood clean-up that they heard about through the club. They also looked out for other people’s children in the neighborhood and experienced a strong network of other parents with whom they could talk and feel a sense of community. One single mother explained the value of having such adult connections in the context of her life at home with three school-age boys and no adults other than herself. For the handful of parents who presented at the National Family Support Symposium, the connections were even more cherished. As one mom explained, she was “...isolated as a parent, so it is great to come here.” Youth see and feel this, too. As one 12th grade boy explained, “our parents have each other and the staff. I like being able to share my mom with the other parents.”

Parent–Staff Relationships

According to club leaders, Family PLUS programming also resulted in positive relationships between parents and club staff, and equally important, less negative relationships as evidenced by fewer parental complaints. These positive relationships translated into more joint problem-solving around child behavior issues, word-of-mouth marketing by satisfied parents (a benefit not examined by those who study family engagement in public schooling), and smoothly run programs as assisted by a dedicated parent volunteer workforce. At the club in which we conducted a site visit, even the younger children (ages 9–12 years)

recognized the power of families' presence in the club to help children. Children in a focus group discussed two "out-of-control" boys who underwent a remarkable transformation during their tenure at the club, aided by the club's strict adherence to rules and discipline and by strong communication between parents and staff, as any form of misbehavior was reported to parents immediately. As one club leader elaborated, problem-solving can occur across parent, child, and staff member because parents are often present in the building as volunteers, so it doesn't feel like a staff member is dumping on a parent at pick up time, but rather having a timely conversation with both the parent and child about disciplinary issues/concerns.

Discussion

Preliminary findings from an evaluation of the first two years of BGCA's Family PLUS initiative reveal emerging strategies for implementing family-strengthening activities by actively linking school, club, and family; culturally tailoring programming; placing children at the center of programming; and pairing family-focused efforts with other targeted programming. Such strategies partially address common challenges in working with families in youth development settings, including outreach, staff buy-in, and sustainability.

Findings also suggest that these Family PLUS programming strategies may positively influence parent-child relationships, adult development, and parent-staff relationships. Central theories in the family engagement literature may help explain how the above-mentioned strategies promote these outcomes. Specifically, improved parent-child relationships may be facilitated by parental presence in and communication across youth settings, which affords parents knowledge of children across youth contexts. Research and practice increasingly demonstrate that such intentional linkages across youth contexts (e.g., family, youth development, school, informal learning institutions, and health and social services) may promote positive academic and social outcomes, especially for the most at-risk youth—a concept recently described as complementary learning (Weiss, Coffman, Post, Bouffard, & Little, 2005).

Likewise, creating meaningful and culturally relevant programming conveys respect and heeds parents' priorities, which may in turn encourage parents to take advantage of crucial family support services, realize personal goals, and contribute their own talents to the club (Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999; Valdés, 1996). Also, hiring and fostering family-friendly staff may engender trust and the exchange of information, which in turn improves parent-staff relationships and joint support of children. Such trust is conducive to productive conversations between parents and educators and is a manifestation of strong

social capital, meaning the relationships within and between learning settings that confer multiple benefits on children (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004).

As a relatively new endeavor, the components and processes that make up the Family PLUS initiative as well as its evaluation results should be considered preliminary. The evaluation results in particular relied on limited data, including a single case study of a highly lauded club with a unique approach to engaging parents through a strict volunteer requirement, two parent focus groups that are not representative of all parent constituents but rather consisted of parents in leadership positions at the club level and beyond, and a pre- and post-survey design that focused only on grant recipients and did not include a comparison group. The study limitations and preliminary evaluation findings of the Family PLUS pilot initiative have informed a research-based outcome evaluation study now underway with 2008-2009 grantees. The study builds off of the initial evaluation but incorporates a matched group of comparison clubs, site visits to 8 grantee clubs across the U.S., more extensive parent and youth focus groups, and new data collection on specific implementation supports (e.g., site-based training). Data collection processes have also been strengthened by integrating evaluation data requests into existing monitoring requirements (i.e., quarterly reports) and by utilizing BGCA staff to make data collection requests.

More generally, future family engagement research focused on youth development settings must head in the direction of family engagement research in general. First, toward longitudinal and randomized experimental studies that can map family influences on youth outcomes over time, with a sense of the complex mediated and moderated pathways involved, and with more causal confidence about specific interventions. Likewise, a multitude of outcomes must be considered, especially as the aims of youth development programs are potentially broad and far-reaching. Second, the field must head toward research-based typologies and in-depth qualitative studies that provide a framework in which to understand and guide practice efforts and to explore in greater depth the processes by which family engagement strategies foster positive outcomes in youth development settings.

Endnotes

¹We use the term “parent” broadly in this paper to refer to parents and other primary caregivers of children and youth.

²The family relations and cohesion scale includes six items, each measured on an ascending four-point scale that denotes increasing familial cohesion and positive relations.

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Authors' Note

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