

INTRODUCTION

For my senior project I chose to do an internship with the Child Advocacy Commission, a not-for-profit corporation. The agency currently has over twelve ongoing programs designed to educate and aid the public with various problems or concerns relating to children or child care.

The Child Advocacy Commission was founded in 1976 to advocate for families and children. It is dedicated to enhance the quality of life for children in the Lower Cape Fear Area. It is their belief that prevention and early intervention programs are an investment for the future of our children and community.

The agency is involved in both the state and local levels of advocacy, legislation and public policy. The funding for the current programs come from government grants, foundation grants, fundraising, and donations from private and corporate donors. The Child Advocacy Commission has abundant programs designed for the needs of children and families in the Lower Cape Fear Region.

The Child Advocacy Commission's mission is to 'provide avenues for growth, opportunities for success, a voice for justice and a hand to hold for children and young people'. The agency follows this mission in all of its endeavors. My place at Child Advocacy Commission is with the Family Nurturing Program. I will be a group facilitator with the children, age birth to five, for the sixteen-week program. It will be my duty to provide interactive lessons and activities with the children. These lessons and activities will help these children deal with anger management and self-esteem. It will be my duty as well to observe the interaction between parent and child.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recently there has been a lot of research on at-risk, low-income, African-American, single mothers and their parenting skills. The majority of the research looks at single mother headed households. This is relevant to the Family Nurturing Program since the majority of the participants are at-risk; low-income, single-mother headed households.

According to Abell and Clawson (1996), the previous literature has been known to imply that low-income ethnic groups have the same parenting styles of the ethnic majority and middle class, the standard samples in research. Researchers began to reject these assumptions and do more research on the subject.

More current research gives us a better understanding of the relationship between mothers and their children. All of the articles used look at parenting styles and how that affects a child's well being. The majority of the articles look at the relationship between mothers and their children. Overall, the current research looks at how social situations can be harmful to the children as well as the parents. The research indicates that there is a link between risk factors and child development outcomes.

The article by Abell and Clawson is similar to the article by Shumow and Vandell; these two articles deal with actual parenting styles used by the parents and how they affect children. The goal of Abell and Clawson's (1996) study is aimed to look at the social conditions and mother's values for their children and how they are associated with their child-rearing attitudes, values, behaviors and goals. The goal of Shumow and Vandell's (1998) study is to examine the effect of three parenting dimensions on parenting strategies and child adjustment. These two articles looked specifically at parenting styles and how they affect the children. These articles look at the social conditions mothers are faced with and how that affects the children. Both of these studies were long term.

The article by Aurora Jackson (1998) and the article by Joseph Stevens (1998) are similar; they both look at the role of social support for the low-income mothers, such as the social bonds mothers and children have outside of the home, whether it is friends or family. These support systems may either hinder difficulties or improve the home situations.

There are a few differences in these two studies, Stevens looks at blacks and whites and Jackson just looks at blacks. Also Stevens' study has more dimensions to it. He has more variables to examine, such as locus of control.

Like Jackson (1998) Murry and Brody (1999) can be related to Jackson's article because they both look at the economic situations of families. Murry and Brody (1999)

reveal the link between low levels of parental protection and the lower self-worth and self-regulation found in the children.

METHODS USED IN CURRENT RESEARCH

The methods used by the researchers were similar, four of the five used questionnaires. It varied from a rating scale to standardized tests. Four researchers used interviews, some in addition to the questionnaires. All of the researchers used a large sample of families, ranging from 162 to 800. Murry and Brody (1999) conducted home interviews with their subjects, which allowed them to observe the home interaction between mother and child. The time period ranged from 2 months to 3 years, all requiring contact within that time.

In contrast, Stevens' (1998), uses a set of four self-administered questionnaires. He did not do repeat questionnaires or follow-ups. He also only surveyed the mothers and not the children.

FINDINGS IN CURRENT RESEARCH

The results of Abell and Clawson's (1996) and Shumow and Vandell's (1998) study are related. Their results show that the effects of economic hardships play a part in how the emotional and psychological distress of poverty translates into harsh parenting skills. This approach has negative consequences for the children's behavioral adjustment.

The results of Jackson's and Stevens' studies are comparable, however Jackson's study was more general than Stevens. Stevens categorized his subjects and drew separate conclusions. The overall findings say that the mothers' who had less social support tend to have higher rates of depression and that leads to greater stress. Both researchers said that the benefits of social support are overwhelming. Stevens was able to be more specific about which group of mothers' sought social support. Black teen mothers and white adult mothers' sought social support from their families, although white adult mothers also sought support from professionals. The black adult mothers had a tendency too not seek social support from anyone.

Murry and Brody (1999) find that at-risk children have greater opportunities to engage in problem behavior. These children have higher rates of low self-worth and self-regulation. These results correlate with Abell and Clawson's (1996) study and with Shumow and Vandell, since the results deal specifically with children's adjustment.

All of these studies are relevant to the Family Nurturing Program since they all deal with low-income mothers and the majority of single mothers. The Family Nurturing Program identifies these parenting problems and comes up with solutions that can have excellent long-term results.

METHODS

The goal of the Family Nurturing Program is to increase positive interaction and coping skills while decreasing incidents of child abuse and substance abuse. The program is designed to create better relationships between parents and children. The parents meet in a small group for two hours over a sixteen-week period, which is lead by a licensed counselor. The children meet with experienced educators during the same time the parents meet. The end result will hopefully result in better communication between parents and their children.

In order to reach the goals, the parents must be willing to have an open mind and be willing to learn new parenting styles. The program is primarily based on the parents coming voluntarily, however, some will be assigned to attend through the Department of Social Services. The majority of the participants who are assigned through the Department of Social Services are attending the program in order to maintain custody of their children.

The goals for my work with the program will be met through a series of classes designed to help parents learn better coping skills and parenting styles. At the beginning of each program the parents are given a pre-test, which gives the counselor a basis to start with. The pre-test asks the parents a series of forty questions in which they answer, 'strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree, disagree and uncertain'. The questions are based on topics such as, 'punishment, expectations, empathy, role reversal and power independence'. The results of the pre-test are not given to the parents until after the program has ended. The results are confidential to everyone, except the program

coordinator. This test is graded and will be compared to a post-test after the sixteen-week program.

Throughout the program parents and children over the age of eight are given a family log to complete. This log will help parents and children see how the program is or is not being beneficial. The questions ask, 'how are you changing, how are your children changing and how is your family changing'. This process is done randomly throughout the program.

Also throughout the program the program coordinator makes two home visits. During the visits the coordinator is looking for signs of improvement, or lack of, such as, better communication between the parent and child and just an overall picture of the home life for both parent and child. The coordinator is also there to assist the client with any questions or concerns they might have.

At the end of the program, parents are given a post-test, which is compared with the pre-test to see if any of their values and beliefs have changed. The post-test asks the same questions as in the pre-test, however, the wording may be changed a little. It is based on the same topics as the pre-test. The test scores are primarily used to evaluate the program's effectiveness. It is kept confidential and if anyone other than the counselor looks at the results the names are left off and the clients are assigned numbers.

After both tests have been administered the program coordinator will map out the results of both test and takes the average. With this average a percentage is calculated and compared with all of the group members. The ideal is for the post-tests scores to increase; however, this is not always the case. The majority of the time the score on the post-test increases by a score of three or more. The goal is not to make a perfect score on the tests but to make a positive increase between the pre and post-test.

REFLECTIONS ON MY INTERNSHIP

Throughout my time with the Family Nurturing Program I have been able to gain a lot of hands on experience in working with at risk parents and children. I have been able to witness the remarkable changes these parents have made. Although the program will not officially be finished until May 15, 2000, I have already seen improvements in the quality of parenting with the participants.

In working with the Child Advocacy Commission I have been able to learn how a not-for-profit agency works. I have learned how each program is funded and the processes that must be done in order to maintain their operating status. I have familiarized myself with the rules of a not-for-profit agency, meaning that I have been able to learn who has the authority in each program and what channels they must go through before any changes can be made.

With this experience it has enabled me to help with program development. I was able to help start a new program, the Preschool Play Center, which is designed to help adults and their children play and learn together. The goal of this program is to provide an interactive play center for adults and their children to learn better communication skills and to nurture the relationships between parent and child. The idea of the Preschool Play Center evolved from working with the Family Nurturing Program. I was able to see that resources were needed in the Housing Authority for parents and children. This place offers the residents of Creekwood a safe place to interact with their children.

The knowledge that I have gained in my academic career has also helped in my internship experience. Throughout my college career I have taken numerous classes that have been a useful tool in my time with Child Advocacy Commission. Sociology of Children and Childhood showed the historical, cultural and social constructs of childhood. Sociology of the Family dealt with the importance of the family unit and the effects it can have on children's development. It was also helpful in understanding the physical and mental development of children. The knowledge I gained from the Sociology Internship class helped me with my oral communication skills. It has provided me with the self-confidence that I need to become successful in this field. I was also able to develop leadership and computer skills; that will be an asset to me in my future career endeavors.

During my internship I did not encounter any problems. If I had any questions or concerns I felt very comfortable talking with my supervisor, both in class and at the site. It was a pleasure having both my class and site supervisors as mentors. They were able to guide me throughout the semester. I was able to take valuable work ethics away from the internship experience.

Finally, my internship experience has been a positive experience for me. I have learned how to work with others towards a goal. I have learned how to communicate with coworkers and my supervisor. My time with the Child Advocacy Commission has given me networking capabilities within this field that are immeasurable.

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