

Key Practice Findings from the Evaluation of *Hope for Children*: An Interagency Collaboration Providing Services to Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

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Description of the *Hope for Children* (HFC) Program:

To address significant service gaps in their community, three agencies joined in a collaborative effort to provide services to children whose families have been affected by domestic violence. The three collaborating agencies included an agency providing domestic violence and sexual assault services (**Interact**), an agency providing child-abuse prevention services (**SAFEchild**), and an agency providing family-focused mental health services (**Triangle Family Services**). Based on the agencies' recognition of the need for services that would not only mitigate the negative consequences of domestic violence for children but also interrupt the cycle of violence, the three agencies launched a collaborative program using a system-of-care framework.

Description of Evaluation:

Led by a university-research team, the collaborative implemented a program evaluation of *HFC*. The two-year evaluation comprised four independent, but related, data collection components that included (1) surveys with parents whose children received *HFC* services; (2) in-depth interviews with parents whose children received *HFC* services; (3) surveys with community professionals who work with *HFC* clients; and (4) in-depth interviews and focus groups with *HFC* agency staff. Overall, the evaluation findings showed that *HFC* was successfully meeting its service goals, and that parents, community professionals, and program staff were strongly satisfied with *HFC*. Each evaluation component also identified program challenges that point toward important knowledge gains from this project. The complete evaluation report, including details about the *HFC* program services, is available upon request from Dr. Rebecca J. Macy (rjmacy@email.unc.edu).

- The evaluation determined that **specific service strategies** and **service qualities** were critical to the success of the program.
 - Parents reported that their families benefited from skill-building and skill-development services in the areas of parenting, communication, feeling expression, and coping.
 - Parents noted the value of being included in their child's care, such as the development of their children's service plans and service goals.
 - Parents reported the importance of feeling respected and being treated with compassion by *HFC* program staff and the agencies' administrative staff.
 - Parents described the importance of having *HFC* program staff that were professional, well trained, and knowledgeable about domestic violence.
 - Parents stated that they and their families benefited from having (1) a forum to discuss their experiences with domestic violence; and (2) an opportunity to learn that other families also struggle with domestic violence.

PRACTICE BRIEF

- The evaluation showed the value of **holistic and comprehensive services** because children exposed to domestic violence often have considerable material needs that are not addressed by therapeutic and parenting interventions alone.
 - A key program success was the comprehensive approach the *HFC* providers used to address children's and their families' needs, including attention to basic needs such as safe housing, food, and transportation.
 - The evaluation showed that offering case management services at all the collaborating agencies was important to providing services to children and their families. In addition, creating a referral process between agencies was key to easing the burden for parents trying to find additional services for their children and families.
 - Whenever possible, programs providing services to children exposed to domestic violence should also offer services to parents, ideally at the same location and during the same times when children are receiving services. Though *HFC* was conceived and developed as a program for children, the findings showed that the parents of the children served were in need of services that *HFC* could not always provide (e.g., low- and no-cost mental health therapy).
- The evaluation showed the importance of providing **culturally relevant services** for children and their families.
 - Parents described the value of having their families' religious and spiritual beliefs, culture, and heritage recognized and respected by the *HFC* staff.
 - The *HFC* program provided services in Spanish as well as English. However, the findings showed that the program was not always able to meet the needs of all Spanish-speaking families consistently across the program agencies. To address this service challenge, the research participants recommended that *HFC* offer all services in a bilingual format at each agency whenever possible.
- The evaluation showed the value of ensuring that **services are convenient** for families to help enable their full participation. Parents noted the importance of the program offering convenient therapy and group meeting times. Parents also noted the importance of agency locations both in terms of convenient parking and accessibility by public bus.
- The evaluation showed the importance of **cross-training staff** within the collaboration.
 - On one hand, the findings showed that the unique expertise from each agency was an important strength of the program because each agency brought specialized knowledge, skills and services that enhanced the collaborative.
 - On the other hand, staff participants described service delivery differences among the agencies as a challenge for collaboration. Such differences included routines of daily operation and variation in training, skills, and treatment perspectives.
 - Thus, collaborations should establish an interagency service/treatment approach, and each staff should be trained in this approach to ensure similar foundational skills, knowledge, and philosophy. At the same time, collaborations should also seek to retain program staff's specific and unique expertise within this general service/treatment approach.

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