Increasing Family Involvement In Youth Development

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Introduction

This paper is intended to examine a healthy and competent youth that has shown positive youth development. Demographic information, regarding the youth, is included for context. The success of the youth is evaluated to determine what family factors or other hypothesis may have contributed to his success. Additionally, the paper explores what youth development methods were attempted that may have impacted positive development.

Next, the paper will discuss Family Systems Theory and how additional family involvement in the development of the youth could increase positive development. Possible strategies for improvement are identified based on available research.

Analysis

Description of Chosen Youth

Chris is a 16-year-old, Caucasian male. He is a well-adjusted teenager, but when he was younger, he showed a tendency toward poor decision-making. Many times he seemed unwilling to accept coaching, and seemed to be choosing a path that was detrimental to his positive development. I worked with Chris at First Baptist of Lexington, in Lexington, SC, where I served as the Youth and Family Pastor. Chris attended almost all youth and family functions at the church and was very active in the program. As Chris got older, he began to make wiser decisions that lead to a more positive outcome. At the time of this paper, Chris is active in a local church, volunteers regularly in his community, and takes his education seriously. He positively influences other youth and is considered to be a model student. He is trustworthy, not impulsive and demonstrates a strong work ethic.

Critical Components of Positive Development

There were many positive components of development that I experienced while working with Chris. First, Chris and I spent much quality time together and developed a strong, nurturing relationship. Research shows that youth who are involved in nurturing relationships tend to move on a trajectory of positive development (Sadye Paez Errickson & Diane C Berry, 2015). Second, the program gave Chris a place of belonging. He did not feel accepted at school, and having a place that feels supportive leads to better psychological functioning (Sadye Paez Errickson & Diane C Berry, 2015). Lastly, the program presented very important content in a relevant and creative way. This allowed Chris to connect to the content and find meaning for his life. Presenting content in a relevant manner is an important aspect of positive youth development (Quinn, 2004).

Family Factors that Contributed to Success

Chris reaps the benefits of existing in a system that promotes positive youth development. His parents are seemingly happily married. They attend church regularly with their family and use the resources of the church to positively effect Chris and his siblings. They work in collaboration with the Youth Pastor to evaluate and improve his development. Research shows that family members are "inextricably embedded in the larger family system and can never be fully understood independent of the context of that system" (Cox & Paley, 1997). For Chris, this embedded family system leads to positive development because his family is invested in his growth. Similarly, the resources of the church are dedicated to Chris' development, which creates synergy between multiple factors to his advantage. Chris' family handles conflict well and does not seem argumentative or aggressive toward each other, even in situations containing

higher levels of conflict. Research shows that negative interactions lead to disengagement between parents and children (Cox & Paley, 1997). By decreasing the amount of negative interactions, while still teaching positive development, Chris' parents remain engaged in his life and are able to have a beneficial impact in his growth.

Increasing Family Involvement for Continued Development

While working in full time youth ministry, I noticed that youth who had a supportive family structure moved toward positive development much more easily than those without family support. Seeing that youth and families were linked in such an obvious way caused me to change the title of the program from Youth Ministry to Youth and Family Ministry. I began to include families in the developmental process and saw positive results. Having never studied systems theory, it was more of an instinctual decision.

Summary of Systems Theory

Systems Theory is a term that is used to evaluate behavior using complex systems. This theory helps to explain how problems can be resolved in group structures such as organizations and families, instead of individually. One of the main theories related to youth development is the Developmental Systems Theory (DST). This theory, in particular, views development as a process where an individual youth is changed in the context of the youth's current environment (Vimont, 2012). This is important because development does not occur in solitude, but is affected by factors such as current relationships, family structures, and daily environments. Using this framework, youth can be viewed as complex systems that interact with other complex systems, and change will occur from either internal or external factors that all combine to make a

system (Vimont, 2012). Understanding the family as a system that is embedded into a larger community system helps youth developers understand their role in creating programs that provide positive development (Cox & Paley, 1997). When I was a novice in youth development, I focused mainly on the needs of the youth, without consideration for the larger family system. However, research shows that considering the individual without considering the larger system provides an incomplete picture what must be done for positive change (Cox & Paley, 1997).

Research-Based Strategies for Promoting Success

Increasing family involvement in youth development can lead to success. This section is intended to identify specific strategies to move a successful youth further toward positive development.

First, create an environment of positive communication. The Family Solutions program creates environments where families feel comfortable working together and they participate in tasks that increase cooperation and trust building (Quinn, 2004). Implementing these types of strategies can improve overall communication in families and decrease negative interactions. Studies show that negative interactions among family members can lead to a pattern of disengagement, which creates a negative environment toward development (Cox & Paley, 1997).

Next, design programming around parental inclusion. Youth developers should make it normal for parents and children to attend and participate in activities together. It is the responsibility of the youth developer to develop programming that benefits, not just the youth, but also the family as a whole. In a recent study of low-income families, research showed that the difference between high achieving and low achieving students, in the same neighborhood,

was parental involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). If more parents understood how their involvement could affect their child's success, they may be more apt to participate. Research shows that four key elements of parental involvement are: approach, attitudes, atmosphere, and actions (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). By focusing on these elements, teachers could build comprehensive programming for parental involvement that may have far greater success.

It would be beneficial to train parents independently to better equip them to deal with youth development situations when a youth developer is not available. Many parents feel that they are not well-equipped to help their children, so they do not get involved because they feel they will not contribute to positive outcomes. This feeling can increase as students get older and parents feel less equipped (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). I recommend offering opportunities for parents to receive specific training that could lead to a certificate of accomplishment. This could increase parental confidence and lead to a more interactive family system.

Lastly, I would recommend that parents be involved in the planning of the schedule so that they feel they have a voice in the process (Quinn, 2004). The more invested that parents feel, the greater the chance that they will be involved in the overall process of positive youth development.

Conclusion

Research shows that family inclusion is a key factor of positive youth development. There are many ways to increase family involvement in individual youth programs. Implementing some of the suggestions in this paper should help improve overall family development that will lead to more well-developed youth.

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