Increasing Parent Involvement with Parent Progress Reports

Abstract

Youth service providers recognize that involving families in children's learning is critical to academic achievement and overall healthy development. Yet youth service providers face ongoing challenges engaging families in out-of-school time programs. The authors, administrators of a nationally recognized youth development program, share their success using a tool to provide parents with expectations, feedback, and motivation: The Parent Progress Report. Tips for replicating the Parent Progress Report are provided along with lessons learned.

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Background

Youth service providers recognize that involving families in children's learning is a key to academic achievement and overall healthy development (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Fan & Chen, 2001; Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Hara & Burke, 1998; Jeynes, 2005). Yet youth service providers face ongoing challenges engaging families in out-of-school time programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2008; Horowitz & Bronte-Tinkew, 2007). Barriers exist in linking together best practices like communicating expectations, structuring feedback, and support, and quantifying family involvement (DeBord, Martin, & Mallilo, 1996; Torretta & Bovitz, 2005). The authors, administrators of Adventure Central, a nationally recognized youth development program, struggled with these same issues and found that Parent Progress Reports deliver significant results.

Adventure Central, a partnership for positive youth development between Five Rivers MetroParks, Ohio State University Extension, and 4-H, has been intentionally focused on engaging and involving families in the afterschool program (a National 4-H Program of Distinction) through multiple methods since involvement in a Children, Youth and Families at Risk initiative from 2003 to 2007 (Ferrari, et. al, 2006). We have conducted parent evaluations to measure satisfaction, impact of the program, and interest in programmatic offerings. An annual parent/guardian meeting, or Parent Round Up, was held each fall at the beginning of the afterschool program. New family orientations were provided for all new families prior to starting the program. We facilitated family focused activities each semester to connect parents with what youth had been learning and raise awareness of community resources. Even with all of these structured engagement opportunities as well as a daily commitment to have staff informally connect with parents, there still seemed to be a gap in expectations between parents

and the program.

Introducing the Parent Progress Report

In 2011, Adventure Central introduced a Parent Progress Report as a tool to provide families with semi-annual feedback in the areas of communication, youth attendance, submitting copies of youth report cards, parent volunteerism, and attendance at family programs. (See Table 1 for more details.) Families are given an overall score/ grade (1-100). Those with exemplary scores are publicly recognized for their commitment. Families with a score below 60 are encouraged to set up a one-on-one meeting with staff and are not eligible for preferred enrollment in future Adventure Central Programs. Extenuating circumstances are taken into consideration, and families have opportunities to earn bonus points by attending Extension-sponsored programs or other educational or family-oriented programs in the community.

Table 1.

Parent Progress Report Example

Parent Progress Report Measurement Areas	Possible Points
Parent-Adventure Central Communication (25 points total)	
Parent supports staff (ex. reinforces behavior expectations, seeks feedback and asks about what youth is learning)	5
Checks in with child's group leader regularly	5
Is timely and attentive to details	5
Attends parent/staff conferences as needed and is easily accessible to meet	5
Maintains current contact information (phone, address, emergency contact, medical information)	5
Youth Attendance (20 points total)	
Informs Adventure Central staff of absences ahead of time	10
Picks youth up at the appropriate time (or communicated extenuating circumstances)	10
Youth Report Card (15 points total)	
Submitted current report card each grading period	10
Submitted interim report	5
Parent Volunteerism (20 points total)	
10 hours per school year (2 points per hour completed)	20

Family Engagement Programming (20 points total)	
Attend at least 2 Family Engagement Events (10 points per event)	20
Total Points Possible	**100**

Results

The Parent Progress Report has proven to be an effective method of clearly communicating program expectations with families, holding families accountable for these expectations, and increasing the positive program support available to youth. From 2008-2010, Adventure Central had an average of 34 parent/guardian volunteer hours per year. After implementing the Parent Progress Report in 2011, we saw an increase to 200 hours per year and then to 355 hours in 2012—that's 10 times the parent volunteer hours! (Figure 1). Attendance at parent and family engagement programs (e.g., family ice skating, science fair expo, and end-of year picnic) increased, growing from 263 attendees in 2010 to 714 in 2012 (Figure 2). In addition to these quantitative measures, staff reported an overall increase in parent communication and a decrease in youth behavior problems.
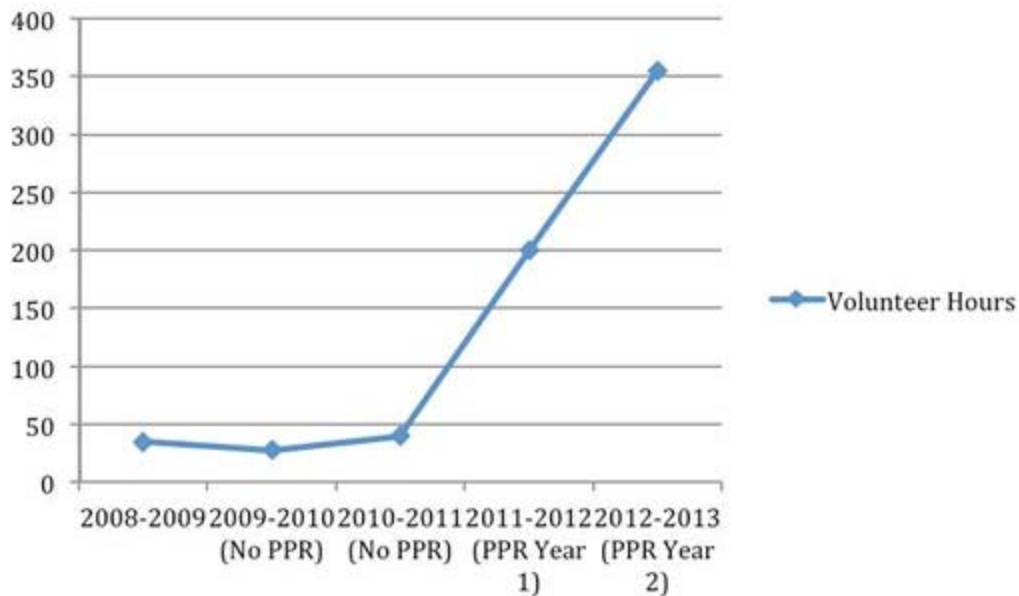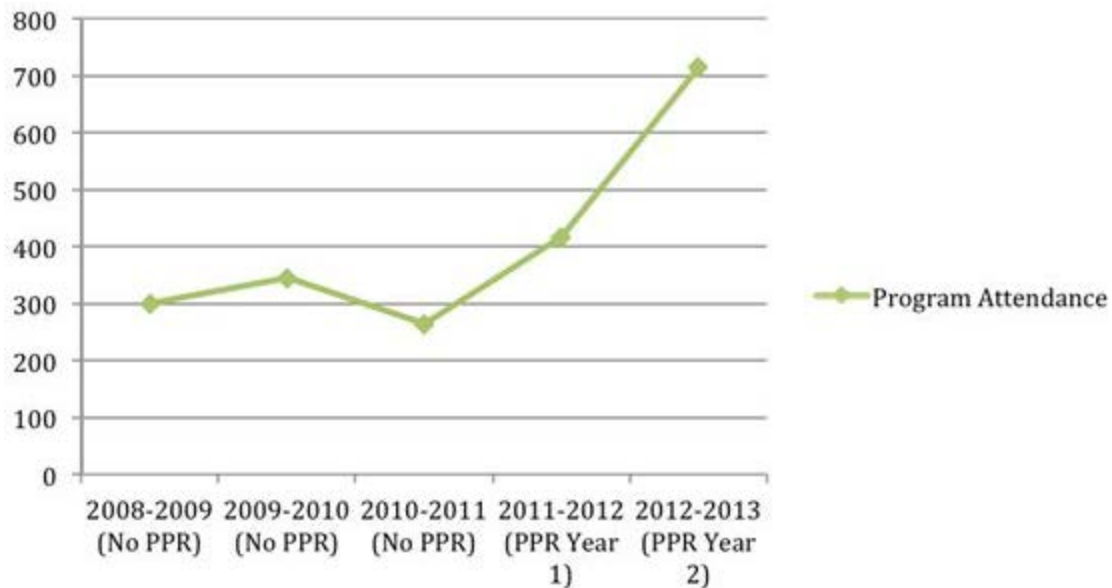
Figure 1.

Parent Volunteer Hours 2008-2013

Figure 2.

Family Engagement Program Attendance 2008-2013

Tips for Implementation

Implementing a parent progress report is a major programmatic investment. It takes time to develop appropriate measurement areas, requires staff to continuously communicate and record results, and demands education and explanation to parents, but in our experience the return has far exceeded the investment. We offer the following tips for anyone considering implementing a parent progress report.

- Align the system to support your mission, and keep it simple. There are lots of things parents could be asked to do, but strategically aligning the system to support family engagement, and thus Positive Youth Development, is critical.

- Tactfully explain the "why" to parents. Introducing the Parent Progress Report for the first time can be daunting to staff and a little scary for parents. Explain that this is truly for the child's development and that the goal is to see everyone be successful.

- Identify a motivator. For our program the motivator is preferred registration for our popular day camp. Other options could include fees or "working off" potential fees through volunteering. Positive recognition of a job well done is a good incentive, but not enough to produce results and sustained commitment for most parents.

- If requiring volunteer hours, do a large group volunteer orientation at the beginning of the year to maximize program time rather than doing lots of small orientations throughout the year.

- Be clear and concise on cut-off dates for volunteer hours and turning in report cards or other documents so that the process is as smooth as possible. Be very specific about how many points are allocated to each area so that there is little room for discrepancy.

- Involve all staff in the scoring. Everyone has a different experience with the families, so make sure

to take all perspectives into consideration.

- Show appreciation. Highlight top scores at large events or in newsletters (use pictures).

- Remember, what gets evaluated gets done!

- Recognize that feedback should be a two-way street. Create a mechanism for parent feedback regarding the program and staff accountability.

- Get organized. Set up a database to track and manage the scores from assessment to assessment to measure progress over time.

- Although it will feel uncomfortable at first, get started anyway.

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