

## Strengthening Family Members of Incarcerated Youth: A Productive Role for Extension

### Abstract

The challenge to provide incarcerated youth the skills needed to succeed and avoid recidivism has prompted the use of family-systems approaches in juvenile detention centers. A quasi-experimental study was conducted in northern Alabama to determine the impact of a conflict resolution workshop on the family members of incarcerated youth. Results indicated a significant difference in participants' knowledge and anticipated behavior after attending the workshop. It is important to note that this research further supports the use of family-systems approaches in juvenile detention centers.

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## Introduction

For many years much research and many educational programs have been directed towards assisting incarcerated adults, especially those who are parents (Kazura, Temke, Toth, & Hunter, 2002; Reilly, 2003; Maiorano & Futris, 2005). However, this hasn't always been the case for incarcerated youth. The Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act (CRIPA, 1980) made it possible for juvenile offenders to receive educational, medical, transition, and mental health services. Traditionally, educational programs for incarcerated youth were developed for working with the incarcerated youth themselves, but, over time, prevention and intervention programs recognized and promoted family systems approaches for working with incarcerated youth.

Although research has shown the effectiveness of family-systems approaches in reducing recidivism and delinquency among juvenile offenders (Guerra, Kim, & Boxer, 2008), institutionalized youth, when compared to non-institutionalized youth offenders, are exposed to far fewer family-centered approaches (Himmelstein, 2011). In the state of Alabama, where approximately 1,101 juvenile offenders are held in one of the state's 14 juvenile detention facilities (Office of Juvenile Justice and

Delinquency Prevention, 2011), such programs are being conducted. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System's Urban Affairs and New Nontraditional Program together with the National 4-H Council and a public, non-profit youth services organization have partnered to offer a family-systems program to the juvenile offenders and their family members. This program is called Alabama 4-H Living Interactive Family Education (LIFE) Mentoring Program. It provides mentoring opportunities to enhance parental/caregiver engagement as well as provide educational programs and interventions that are geared towards helping incarcerated youth and family members/caregivers make more positive and lasting changes in their lives.

Killan, Brown, and Evans (2002) noted that Extension professionals are positioned to provide incarcerated youth with the skills they need to succeed and avoid recidivism. Likewise, they are positioned to provide parents and family members of incarcerated youth with the knowledge and skills needed to strengthen their family relationships, which could possibly decrease the likelihood of youth repeating undesirable behaviors. The research reported here looked at the impact of a component of the LIFE project on the parents and family members of incarcerated youth.

## **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of the research was to assess a conflict resolution workshop offered through the partnership of a public, non-profit juvenile detention center in the northern region of Alabama and the Urban Affairs and New Nontraditional Programs of Alabama Cooperative Extension. Components of the Diffusing Conflict module taken from the Family Advocacy through Caring Engagement Strategies (FACES) Curriculum were used in increasing the youth and their family members' awareness of conflict and how to more effectively deal with it. FACES is a family-strengthening, curriculum-based program developed by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System's Urban Affairs unit. The specific objectives of the workshop were to determine whether:

- A. Perceived knowledge of family members of incarcerated youth regarding conflict differed after attending the conflict workshop.
- B. Family members of incarcerated youth anticipated a change in their behavior as to how they will resolve conflict in the future.

## **Methods and Procedures**

A Family and Child Development Extension specialist was asked to provide a half-day participant-centered workshop on conflict resolution for 24 incarcerated male youth and their family members during their Family Reunification Meeting. The Family Reunification Meeting is a workshop/interaction session offered quarterly through the Alabama 4-H Living Interactive Family Education (LIFE) Mentoring Program for Youth. Clearance for the specialist was granted from the Juvenile Detention Center of the organization one week prior to the workshop.

## **Sample**

The research was conducted during the late fall of 2012 in northern Alabama. The sample consisted

of 36 family members who had made pre-arrangements to visit their incarcerated child or relative during the Family Reunification Quarterly Meeting. Their age ranged from 25 to over 65 years. Of the participants, 63% were Caucasians, 36% were African Americans, and 3% were Hispanic individuals. The majority (81%) of the participants were females, with 11% males and 8% not indicating their gender. More than half (61%) of the participants were single, divorced, or widowed, and only 28% were married.

## Instrumentation

Due to lack of randomization and control, a quasi-experimental pretest/posttest research design was used. A three-part survey instrument was given to the participants before (pretest) and after (posttest) the workshop. Both the pretest and posttest consisted of three sections. Section One consisted of demographic questions. Section Two consisted of a 5-point Likert-type scale of six questions pertaining to participants' perceptions about their knowledge of conflict. Statements in this section were given a weight of 1 for "strongly disagree," 2 for "disagree," 3 for "undecided," 4 for "agree," and 5 for "strongly agree." The scale's reliability was assessed at 0.75 using a Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient. Section Three of both the pre- and posttest used a 4-point scale to assess participants' present and anticipated behavior. The four possible responses to the questions in this section were "never," "rarely," "often," and "always." The responses were weighted from 0 to 3, with "never" receiving the lowest weight and "always" receiving the highest. The reliability of this scale was 0.67. Questions in this section, on both the pretest and posttest, were the same except for the inclusion of "will" in all behavior statements for the posttest.

Before the start of the workshop, participants were given the pretest, and after implementation of the workshop, they were given the posttest. Before administering both the pretest and posttest, participants were told that completion of the surveys was on a voluntary basis. They were also informed of the anonymity of their responses before receiving the pre and posttest.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Version 17 of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows (2007). A dependent *t*-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between participants' pretest mean and their posttest mean after participating in a conflict awareness workshop. For all significant difference found, an effect size was calculated using the following formula:

$$d = \frac{t}{\sqrt{N}}$$

Interpretation of effect size was based on Cohen's (1988) guidelines:

Effect size	<i>d</i>
Small	.20 to .50
Medium	.50 to .80
Large	.80 or higher

## Results

### Objective One

Using an alpha level of .05, a dependent sample *t*-Test was used to assess whether family members of incarcerated youth perceptions of conflict changed after participating in a half-day workshop. Results from Table 1 indicated that the overall perceived knowledge scores of the participants after attending the workshop was significantly higher than before participating in the half-day conflict workshop, with  $t(31) = 3.51$ ,  $p = .00$ ,  $CI.95 = -.677$  to  $-.179$ . The effect size for this analysis ( $d = .62$ ), according to Cohen's (1988) convention, indicates a medium effect. Overall, participants felt significantly more knowledgeable about conflicts and how to more effectively resolve them after attending the workshop with their incarcerated youth family member.

Participants' perceptions of conflict creating division among family members  $t(31) = 2.11$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $d = .38$  and always needing to avoid conflict were significantly different after attending the conflict workshop  $t(31) = 2.12$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $d = .38$ . After attending the workshop, participants' level of agreement was significantly lower, indicating that their perceptions that conflicts always create division and that conflicts should always be avoided were changed. Although effect size indicates a small effect, participants' perceived knowledge scores differed after becoming aware that the manner in which conflicts are handled most often causes division, not the conflict, and that conflict should be addressed instead of avoided in order to have healthier relationships. Similarly, the perceptions of family participants differed significantly after attending the conflict workshop in regards to conflict and their needs  $t(32) = -3.52$ ,  $p = .00$ ,  $d = .62$  and other family members' needs  $t(32) = -3.73$ ,  $p = .00$ ,  $d = .66$  being threatened or not met. As indicated, medium effect was found for both analyses. Family members felt significantly more knowledgeable about the role their needs and the needs of others play in conflict resolution after attending the workshop.

**Table 1.**  
Perceived Knowledge Scores Before and After Attending the Workshop

Perception Statements	x	sd	df	t	p	d
Solving conflict comes naturally*	3.31	1.18	31	-.37	.72	.07
Pretest	3.41	1.21				
Posttest						
My family doesn't really have conflicts*	2.13	1.12	30	-.24	.82	.04
Pretest	2.19	1.35				
Posttest						
Conflict should be avoided as much as possible*	3.74	1.18	30	2.12	.04	.38

Pretest	3.10	1.37				
Posttest						
Conflict, most times, creates division among family members*	3.97	0.91	30	2.11	.04	.38
Pretest	3.58	1.18				
Posttest						
Many conflicts I have with family members are due to their needs being threatened or not met	3.15	1.35	31	-	.00	.66
Pretest	4.13	0.71		3.73		
Posttest						
Many conflicts I have with family members are due to my needs being threatened or not met	2.88	1.29	31	-	.00	.62
Pretest	3.69	1.15		3.52		
Posttest						
<b>Overall</b>	2.82	0.56	31	-	.00	.62
Pretest	3.25	0.62		3.51		
Posttest						
Note: 5 = Strongly Agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Undecided, 2 = Disagree, and 1 = Strongly Disagree  * Reverse scored for calculating overall score.						

## Objective Two

A *t*-Test for dependent samples revealed a significant difference between family participants' overall behavior before attending the conflict workshop and their anticipated behavior after attending the workshop  $t(31) = -4.74, p = .00, CI.95 = -.849 - -.338$  (Table 2). Cohen's effect size value ( $d = .85$ ) suggested a large effect. After attending the conflict workshop, family members of incarcerated youth indicated a significant change in how they will resolve conflicts in the future.

Family participants felt significantly less likely to avoid or do nothing when conflicts arise in the future than what they currently are doing  $t(31) = -2.27, p = .03$ . The effect size of  $d = .41$  indicated a medium effect. Among family participants, there was also a statistically significant

difference between their present use of negotiation skills for dealing with conflicts in their family and their anticipated behavior  $t(31) = -3.14, p = .01, d = .56$ . Although family participants, before the workshop, indicated that they rarely resolved conflicts without anyone feeling hurt or with everyone feeling as though they had been heard, after attending the workshop, family participants' anticipated behavior to resolving family conflicts without anyone feeling hurt or unheard in the future was statistically different from what they were currently doing  $t(31) = -3.63, p = .00, d = .65$ . As with negotiation skills, the effect size indicates a medium effect. Likewise, family participants' anticipated behavior of avoiding name calling, complaining, bringing up the past, and other such behaviors when dealing with conflicts was significantly different from what they were currently doing  $t(31) = -4.54, p = .00, d = .82$ . A large effect was indicated.

**Table 2.**  
Behavior Before Attending the Workshop and Anticipated Behavior After Attending the Workshop

Behavior Statements	x	sd	df	t	p	d
I will avoid conflicts*						
Pretest	1.84	0.68	31	-	.03	.41
Posttest	1.44	1.08		2.27		
I will resolve family conflicts without anyone feeling hurt or unheard						
Pretest	1.66	0.70	31	-	.00	.65
Posttest	2.22	0.83		3.63		
I will use negotiation skills when dealing with conflicts in the family						
Pretest	2.00	0.76	31	-	.01	.56
Posttest	2.56	0.72		3.14		
I will avoid name calling, complaining, bringing up the past and other such behaviors when dealing with conflict						
Pretest	1.69	0.86	31	-	.00	.82
Posttest	2.53	0.76		4.54		
Overall						
Pretest	1.63	0.48	31	-	.00	.85
Posttest				4.74		

Posttest	2.22	0.55					
<p>Note: 0 = Never; 1 = Rarely; 2 = Often; 4 = Always</p> <p>* Reverse scored for calculating overall score.</p>							

## Discussion

The recent trend towards family-oriented or family-focused reforms for treating and educating incarcerated male youth and their family members is a growing occurrence that is supported by much research (Klein, Alexander, & Parson, 1997; Krumpfer & Tait, 2000; Visher, Vigne, & Travis, 2004). Findings from the Family Reunification Program offered by one of Alabama's Juvenile Detention Centers and the Urban Affairs and New Nontraditional Programs of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System give support for such programs. The 36 family members who participated showed a significant difference in their perceived knowledge of how to deal with family conflicts after attending a half-day workshop for family members and their incarcerated male child or relative. Family members of the incarcerated youth felt significantly more knowledgeable about how to effectively resolve conflict in family and other relationships. Findings also indicated a significant difference between the anticipated behavior and the current behavior of family members after attending the workshop. Family members indicated the need for changing the way they resolve conflict in the future. Therefore, it is apparent from the research reported here that more programs for incarcerated youth should consider offering family-focused education for both incarcerated youth and their family members.

Likewise, an important finding for Extension educators is the significant difference the curriculum content made in participants' perceived knowledge and anticipated behavior. The finding and our interpretation tend to suggest that the education intervention in the FACES curriculum was effective in getting family members to understand conflict and its negative effect on all family members if not resolved properly, or in a manner in which no individual will have negative emotional reactions (Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold, & Shelton, 2003). The findings further suggest that family-focused education such as conflict resolution promotes possible behavior changes that may lead to stronger family relationships among incarcerated youth and their family.

The study's small sample size and its lack of randomization limit the findings from being generalized. However, an important benefit demonstrated by this family-focused project for the family members of incarcerated male youth supports the decision of the public, non-profit juvenile detention center, the National 4-H Council, and the Urban Affairs and New Nontraditional Programs Unit of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System to continue to develop and offer family-focused programs to enhance incarcerated youth and their family members' knowledge and relationships.

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