Step-Up: Building Respectful Family Relationships

An intervention for families experiencing youth violence in the home

Program Description:

Step-Up is an intervention program designed to address youth violence and abuse toward family members. The program was developed in 1997 as part of a county-wide, multi-faceted juvenile justice effort to address the high number of cases of juvenile domestic violence toward family members in King County Juvenile Court, Seattle, Washington.

The program utilizes a 21 session cognitive behavioral, skills and strengths based curriculum in a group work setting where youth and parents learn and practice skills for respectful, non-violent family relationships and safety in the home. The program includes a youth group, parent group, and multi-family group.

The curriculum employs best practice and evidence based approaches including cognitive behavioral exercises, skill development, solution focused and motivational interviewing strategies to help youth make specific behavioral changes related to stopping violence and abuse in the home, and building respectful family relationships.

A collaborative, family based approach is used in the family groups where parents and youth learn and practice skills with feedback and support from others. In parent group, parents learn a model of respectful parenting that balances leadership and positive support, promoting non-violence and respect in the family.

Family safety is a priority of the intervention with development of a ‘safety plan’ followed by weekly check-ins within the family group to assess the youth’s progress in staying non-violent and safe with family members. Weekly behavioral goals related to non-violence and respect are set by the youth with progress reported each week in group, fostering accountability for behavior and keeping the focus on using skills learned at home.

Step-Up uses a Restorative Practice model of accountability, empathy and competency development to restore family relationships. Restorative inquiry is used to help youth recognize the effects of their actions on others, cultivate empathy and take steps to repair harm done. A restorative practice approach of engaging youth in a collaborative process with the victim (parent) in a community of families, holding a balance of accountability and support, is a key element of the program.

The overall goal of the program is for youth to stop violent and abusive behavior and to restore safety, trust and respect in the family. The aim is for families to leave Step-Up with a respectful family model established in their home, with a new framework for handling problems and conflict that will prevent further re-offenses of violence and abuse by the youth.

The following is an overview of the goals of the curriculum:

In Teen Group, youth learn and practice

- Understanding and recognizing abuse vs. respect in family relations
- Strategies to prevent using violence and abuse
- Increased self-awareness of thoughts, feelings and behaviors
- Understanding the link between cognitive, emotional and behavioral processes and how to change unhelpful thinking and perceptions that lead to abusive or violent behavior
- Managing difficult thoughts and emotions; self-calming techniques; de-escalation skills;
- Understanding feelings and how to communicate them in respectful ways
- Empathy for family members
- Accountability for hurtful behavior
- Recognition of personal strengths and positive ways to have power in one's life

In Family Group, parents and teens learn and practice

- Re-building parent - youth relationship through restorative process of accountability, empathy and making amends
- Self-awareness, self-monitoring and evaluation of behavior with weekly behavioral goals
- Safety skills to prevent violence; developing and using a personal 'safety plan'
- Assimilating a respectful family model using the Abuse and Respect Wheels as a guide
- Respectful communication and problem solving skills, with role plays and group feedback
- Identifying and building on strengths in self and the relationship
- Listening skills, empathy and understanding needs of other family members
- Giving each other feedback, encouragement and support

In Parent Group, parents learn and practice

- Safe and effective response to violence/abuse by teen

- Disengaging from power struggles
- Self-calming and emotion management skills
- Changing unhelpful thoughts and beliefs
- Parenting skills for re-establishing leadership in the home
- Parenting skills to support youth's behavior change
- Strengthening relationship with their teen

Evaluation Outcomes

The Step-Up program has been evaluated by an outside research firm, with outcomes showing lower recidivism than comparison groups, significantly reduced violence and abuse in the home and significant improvement in youths' and parents' attitudes, skills, behaviors over the course of the intervention (Organizational Research Services, King County Step-Up Program Evaluation, 2005).

The Step-Up program that has been replicated in DuPage County, Illinois, was recently evaluated by the University of Illinois. The results indicate that STEP-UP is effective in significantly reducing recidivism. Step-Up youth showed 52% lower recidivism than the comparison group of non-Step-Up youth. (Ryan & Helton, DuPage county Step-Up Evaluation Report, 2013)

Research Basis for Identified Need

Adolescent violence towards parents is a significant source of violence in American homes. The first data collected on adolescent violence toward family members was in 1976 by Cornell and Gelles in nationwide study of over 2,000 families. They concluded 9% of families in the United States were confronted by an adolescent that physically assaulted at least one of their parents (Cornell & Gelles, 1982). Today that would be 3 million families. Two other researchers took data from the National Survey of Youth collected in 1972 and concluded between 9.2 and 11.7% of all adolescents had assaulted their parents at least once in the previous three-year period (Agnew and Huguley 1989). A more recent review of the last 30 years of research confirms adolescent to parent violence is a major problem, although it is still under reported and lacks research (Hong, et al, 2011).

Because parents are reluctant to call the police on their youth, and law enforcement is reluctant to arrest for this type of domestic violence, the actual number is probably far higher than is documented.

Adolescent violence against parents is also a criminal justice concern. In 1994, one third of all restraining orders issued against adolescent batterers in Massachusetts were aimed at protecting family members, 76% of whom were parents (Cochran, 1994). A 2004 study of youth on probation in a juvenile court in central Illinois county revealed violence against parents was an

important part of their criminal history (Kethineni, 2004). In 2007, data collected in 23 states from the FBI's National Incident Based Reporting System indicates half of juvenile domestic assault offenders victimized a parent (Snyder & McCurley, 2008). Finally, even 30 years ago, concerns were expressed about the lack of a clear response from the legal system. In 1982, a commentary in the San Diego Law Review called for a clear legal policy regarding teen assaults on parents since the existing system was hindering potential remedies for battered parents (Arrigo, 1982).

Research on youth aggression and violence that indicate serious problems in normal adolescent development is based on violence directed at peers and other members of the community (Loeber, 1990). However, aggressive behavior directed at parents has more severe consequences than aggressive behavior directed towards peers. Unlike peers, parents play a unique role in an adolescent's development by providing a stable family environment. All the factors that support healthy adolescent development are in some way tied to parenting practices that guide and support young people into adulthood. When parents are threatened by physical violence, they cannot perform their responsibilities without anxiety and fear of reprisal. Research has shown delinquent youth who are aggressive towards peers are derailed from their normal developmental path (Lochman & Wells, 2002) ; aggression towards parents takes them even further off course.

Youth aggression is not determined by any one factor and is a multifaceted issue. Youth violence towards parents and other family members remains an under researched problem, but certain risk factors are prominent. Youth who live in a home with abuse and violence are at risk for using violence themselves (Elliott & Mihalic, 1997). Being exposed to domestic violence, commonly an adult male in a household who is violent towards a mother, can be a powerful lesson that teaches children violence is an acceptable way of interacting with others, especially family members (Song et.al, 1998). When children are directly physically and emotionally abused, they are at risk for using violence as a result of learning that abuse and violence is a way of responding to conflict (Widom and Maxfield, 2001). Finally, youth that experience a "parenting strategy" of coercive and abusive behavior are also learning an aggressive model of behavior is an acceptable approach to problem solving (Dodge, et al, 1990).

Not all youth who are violent towards parents have lived with violence at home (Routt & Anderson, 2011). Violent behavior is also linked to a number of behavioral factors: attention problems, hyperactivity, impulsiveness and oppositional behavior (Moffitt et al, 2001). These factors can result in lower frustration tolerance, less adaptability to stressful situations and less empathy with others. Aggressive youth also perceive and interpret situations more negatively and see hostility in others where most youth don't. They often develop fewer solutions to problems and favor more aggressive choices. They are less confident when engaging in negotiation and compromise in conflict situations (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Research basis for intervention strategies employed in Step-Up curriculum:

Unfortunately, very little research on the development of aggressive behavior in youth has included youth that are violent at home since much of the research on youth aggression is based on observations of youth in school settings with peers. When parents do report on their youth for research projects about youth aggression, they are rarely asked about violence towards them. However, social learning theory, social information processing and the coercive family process is relevant to youth violence in the home and offers some answers to the question, "why do they act this way?"

Albert Bandura, who first wrote about social learning theory, asserted all behaviors, including aggression, are acquired through similar learning processes (Bandura, 1973). All human beings can think about their behavior, imagine alternative behaviors, consider the consequences of one behavior over another and learn by watching others. All learning takes place by directly experiencing a behavior or by observing the behavior of other people. On a daily basis, individuals are confronted by a variety of situations that result in some effective responses and some ineffectual ones. The effective responses are kept and the ineffectual ones are discarded. We also learn by watching others make successful choices and inadequate ones. A third opportunity to learn is watching behavior portrayed less directly, like in movies, television and video games.

Social learning is more than a theory of behavioral conditioning. Bandura and his colleagues placed a high value on our ability to evaluate a variety of possible actions in each situation and select an action based on anticipated consequences. The decision to select one behavior over the other was not only based on the external consequences the person observed in previous situations, but also on an internal judgment about the choice that was made in each situation. Bandura believed each of us has the capacity to self-regulate by applying a cognitive feedback process to appraise behaviors. He asserted that the thinking process was the key to understanding how aggressive behavior develops.

Another model that explains an aggressive behavior pattern is social information processing (Crick & Dodge, 1994), which adds more depth and detail to Bandura's social learning theory. It looks at how some children's biased and distorted processing of information from their social world results in aggressive behavior. Information processing theory identifies six steps or six cognitive operations that we all use to make decisions. These steps can be summarized by simply stating that we perceive and interpret social cues in our daily environment to develop a variety of possible responses to any situation. From the possible responses, we select one we feel most comfortable doing and then acting it out. Researchers found when children processed information from their social environment in a way that negatively distorted what was really going on and then applied a biased interpretation to it, they made aggressive choices (Lochman & Dodge, 1994).

Adolescent violence in the home is also influenced by parenting practices. When a household is experiencing domestic violence, children not only witness their mother being abused but, also they sometimes become targets of abuse, either physical or emotional (Bancroft, 2002). These experiences are models of aggression for youth. Apart from violence and abusive parenting, when parents use "power assertive parenting" (physical discipline, humiliation, threats), they are sending a message that the use of aggression is a legitimate way to solve problems (Hoffman, 2000). Social learning and social information processing are shaped by these experiences. Observing violence or being victimized by an assaultive or coercive parent leads some children to become aggressive and violent themselves.

The research above describes specific activities that help reduce risk factors and increase protective factors. Step Up incorporates these researched based activities in group sessions:

- Practice problem solving skills
- Generate alternative solutions to problems
- Practice taking another person's perspective
- Recognizing social cues
- Identifying the means to achieve goals
- Identify consequences to behavior
- Identify emotional states of self and others
- Identify thought processes that guides responses
- Practice coping self statements

Research on intervention strategies specifically for youth who are violent and abusive toward parents and family members is non–existent. When Step-Up began in 1997, there were no treatment models to follow or data on effective interventions, and this continues to be the case today. However, the research indicates that intervening with aggressive youth using a group treatment approach that Step Up uses is an effective way of addressing the cognitive-behavioral deficits identified by the research (Lochman et al., 2007). Group sessions with youth have advantages over individual therapy, including the opportunity for role playing and peer modeling of skills, peer feedback and lower cost. Step Up has the additional advantage of having parents and youth together in group sessions that provide support, feedback and modeling. When parents receive training to help their youth change their behavior, the outcomes for youth are enhanced (Tolan, Guerra, & Kendall, 1995; Kazdin & Weisz, 1998).

Parents' involvement in skill learning with their teen provides a gateway between group and home and the opportunity for parents to support their youth's learning at home. Parent group offers parents new strategies for parenting their challenging teens and a framework for re-establishing leadership and respect in the home, with the support of the family and parent group as new approaches are tried out at home. Youth and parents are shored up each week by a whole group of other families working on similar challenges.

Step-Up uses evidence based practices that are proven to be successful with aggressive and violent youth including cognitive behavioral exercises, inter and intra skill development using practice and role play. Motivational interviewing, encouraging 'change talk' and solution focused approaches are used in the process of youth setting weekly behavioral goals and self-evaluating progress and reporting to group (Miller & Rollnick, 2002; Selekman, 2008). Restorative Justice practices are integrated throughout the curriculum in several ways, including writing a 'responsibility letter' and 'empathy letter' to the person who was victimized by the youth's violence. The three pillars of Balanced and Restorative Justice: competency development, accountability and victim safety are practiced throughout the program (Zehr, 2002).

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