

Family Roots: An evaluation of a nature-based adventure therapy group

Nevin J. Harper, Ph.D., Dave Segal, M.A., Katy Rose, M.A., R.C.C.

ABSTRACT

Although adventure therapy, including contact with nature, has been articulated and reasoned effective in youth and adult treatment settings, it is less known what effect intact families in therapy may experience using this approach¹. Thus, the purpose of this evaluation was to determine whether a nature based experiential learning family therapy program could: (a) enhance overall family functioning, (b) increase individuals ability to successfully navigate family contact, and (c) expand individual capacity to access internal and external resources.

BACKGROUND

The Family Roots Adventure Therapy Group (FRP) is an innovative program blending contact with nature and adventure therapy with the practices of family counselling for families facing serious challenges. Its aim is to provide accessible and engaging family counselling services that enhance overall family functioning (through strengthened family bonds and increased family adaptability), build capacity for navigating stress and conflict, and increase the family's awareness of internal and external resources. Participating families attend for a variety of reasons including: youth behavioural challenges, low self-esteem, school difficulties, anxiety, depression, changes in family structure, financial stress, parent-child conflict, and sibling conflict. The FRP consists of monthly weekend adventure days for families in various nearby-nature locations over the course of 7 months.

Programming includes experiential games, group initiatives, psycho-education, nature therapy, and activities such as camping, kayaking, hiking, canoeing and wall climbing to bring awareness to strengths and challenges in the family system. Additionally, each family meets monthly with a family counsellor for ongoing support between Adventure Days and to help integrate learning and change processes. The FRP was first introduced as a pilot project in 2009 and has now served eight families (27 individuals) in its first two years of delivery.

BACKGROUND CONTINUED:

There is a multitude of evidence for the benefits of contact with nature, from the reduction of stress, mental fatigue and negative emotions, to increased directed attention and job satisfaction, mental well-being and even recovery from medical procedures²⁻³. The field of adventure and nature therapy has long recognized the numerous benefits of activity in the outdoors on individual mental health and well-being. Adventure therapy can be defined as the intentional facilitation of a wide range of adventure activities (e.g., team building initiatives, ropes courses, hiking or kayaking) aimed at creating opportunities for personal and interpersonal change towards therapeutic goals⁴. This approach is gaining recognition as an effective treatment approach for children, youth and adults, with evidence suggesting it enhances self-esteem, internal locus of control, emotional regulation, and psycho-social functioning⁵. FRP was designed as strengths-based in nature and the evaluation reflects this by not addressing clinical diagnoses nor conditions.

METHODS

A Program Outcome Survey (POS) utilized likert-scaled questions focusing on family relationships, family adaptability, family internal and external resources, and family conflict resolution. The POS was completed by families on the first and last (pre-post) adventure days, July 24, 2010, and January 22, 2011. Additionally, a Program Exit Survey (PES) was also completed on the last day of programming. Findings from the POS and selected questions and qualitative participant responses related to 'contact with nature' from the PES will be shared. A 100% response rate of pre-post POS and PES surveys for analysis (n = 13).

FINDINGS

Table 1. Pre-Post scores of the Program Outcome Survey

Family Relations	Pre (sd)	Post (sd)	Diff (sd)	P
Family Closeness	3.5 (.88)	4.4 (.77)	-.85(1.06)	.014*
Family Enjoyment	2.8 (.93)	4.2 (8.3)	-1.33(.98)	.001*
Family Flexibility	Pre (sd)	Post (sd)	Diff (sd)	P
Families willingness to change rules based on my needs	2.9 (.99)	3.7 (.86)	-.833(1.02)	.017*
Families willingness to change rules based on my opinion	3.2 (.58)	3.8 (.83)	-.667(.98)	.039*
My willingness to change my opinion based families needs	3.1 (.67)	4.0 (.85)	-.917(.90)	.005*
Internal & External Resources	Pre (sd)	Post (sd)	Diff (sd)	P
Level of peer support	3.4 (.87)	4.2 (.80)	-.769(.44)	.000*
Awareness of community resources	2.8 (1.1)	3.9 (.99)	-1.08(1.3)	.012*
Awareness of personal strengths	3.4 (.87)	4.2 (.73)	-.846(.99)	.009*
Awareness of families strengths	2.9 (.95)	4.2 (.90)	-1.23(1.5)	.011*
Interest in family outdoor recreation	3.8 (.90)	4.5 (.66)	-.692(1.0)	.032*
Family Conflict Resolution	Pre (sd)	Post (sd)	Diff (sd)	P
Ability to resolve conflict	2.8 (.94)	3.6 (.67)	-.791(1.2)	.048*
Problem solving Skills	2.9 (.95)	3.6 (.63)	-.769(1.1)	.018*
Families ability to effectively communicate when in conflict	2.5 (1.1)	3.2 (.95)	-.653(1.3)	.091
My Families ability to listen to me and understand me during conflict	2.5 (.66)	3.5 (.71)	-1.04(.97)	.002*
My own ability to listen to my family during conflict	2.8 (.73)	3.3 (.88)	-.500(1.2)	.144
Ability to express true emotions to my family	3.0 (1.2)	4.1 (.96)	-1.12(1.2)	.006*
My ability to calm down when I am stressed	2.8 (1.1)	3.5 (1.2)	-.653(1.1)	.062
My Families ability to cope with stressful situations	2.7 (1.0)	3.4 (.86)	-.731(1.5)	.095

* Denotes statistical significance

Statistically significant improvements were found on most POS construct items (Constructs: cohesion, flexibility, access to internal & external resources, awareness of internal strengths, ability to resolve conflict) as displayed in Table 1.

Further, participants articulated the inherent benefits of time outdoors, family recreation and intentional group process on the PES. 77% of participants responded that they agree or somewhat agree that their family has increased its awareness of contact with nature. Participant feedback and recommendations reflected the realities of programming outdoors. Some described the experiential, fun and challenging aspects of the program without specific reference to nature or even outdoors. The social interaction and group processes clearly overshadowed the environmental effect in participant written evaluations of program.

These findings, along with a review of the program's first year evaluation, indicate program effectiveness at addressing family issues in a holistic manner. Participant testimonials support the notion that actively engaging in outdoor experiential and challenge activities improves family connectedness.

CONCLUSIONS

The Family Roots Program has grown and developed since its inception more than two years ago. Lessons learned from 2 formal evaluations⁶⁻⁷ have lead to changes in curriculum and intervention design. While results are limited by lack of validity of the measures utilized, comparison group, small sample size and the nature of self-reports, the results do indicate clear improvement across many aspects of family cohesion and adaptability from pre to post program. Future research should include direct comparison of FRP with an indoor treatment approach to identify the effect of utilizing contact with nature therapeutically, to explore program components for impact and to seek replication of the program model. Last, the FRP approach articulates the use of nature as central to its model of change. If this is in fact true, steps need to be taken to evaluate and articulate to increase the validity of this premise.

REFERENCES

- McLendon, T., McLendon, D., Petr, C. G., Kapp, S. A. & Mooradian, J. (2009). Family-directed structural therapy in a therapeutic wilderness family camp: An outcome study. *Social Work in Mental Health, 7*(5), pp. 508-527.
- Berman, M. C., Jonides, J., & Kaplan, S. (2008). The cognitive benefits of interacting with nature. *Psychological Sciences, 19*(12), 1207-1212.
- Maller, C., Townsend, M., Pryor, A., Brown, P. & St. Leger, L. (2005). Healthy nature healthy people: „contact with nature“ as an upstream health promotion intervention for populations. *Health Promotion International, 21*(1), 45-54.
- Alvarez, A. G. & Stauffer, G. A. (2001). Musings on adventure therapy. *The Journal of Experiential Education, 24*(2), 85-91.
- Wilson, S.J. & Lipsey, M. W. (2000). Wilderness challenge programs for delinquent youth: A meta-analysis of outcome evaluations. *Evaluation and Program Planning, 23*.
- Harper, N. (2010). *An evaluation of the Family Roots Program*. University of Victoria.
- Segal, D., Rose, K., & Palmer, J. (2011). An evaluation of the 2010 Family Roots, Adventure Therapy Group: A Sooke Family Resource Society, Boys and Girls Club, and Power To Be collaboration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to acknowledge and extend gratitude to the staff & volunteers who facilitated the program, and specifically, to the families willing to share their experiences. Thanks to Jessica Palmer for her assistance in data collection and analysis. The Family Roots Program was funded by United Way of Greater Victoria, the Telus Victoria Community Board, District of Sooke and through the in-kind support of Boys and Girls Club Services of Greater Victoria, Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society, and Sooke Family Resource Society.

Lead author contact: harper@camosun.bc.ca