Research to Support
Programs for Children, Youth and Families at Risk

The CYFERnet Evaluation Team
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Introduction
Cooperative Extension professionals espouse the long-held and regularly stated belief that all Extension programs are “research-based.” The purpose of this document is to provide research which helps to explicitly state a “research base” for work with children, youth, and families at risk. CYFAR work, based on its vision and mission, has a strong empirical and theoretical basis which has been summarized in this document and relates directly to the CYFAR Philosophy

Those who are planning programs, writing grant proposals, or conducting evaluations can use this research to guide their work. It will be especially useful to those Extension professionals who are responding to CYFAR requests for applications for community-based programs. It can be used to improve programs by learning about the work that has been done elsewhere and can stimulate new ideas for program development and research.

There are many possible approaches to the task of summarizing such an extensive literature, with some choices to be made regarding how to present the information in a useful and succinct format. The authors chose to approach this task with a literature search focused on components of programs that lead to positive outcomes for children, youth and families. Hundreds of articles were read and organized. An ecological approach to individuals, families and communities was used, looking not at any one age group, but across the life span. Diversity in terms of gender, age, race, ethnicity, ability, language, religion, and other characteristics is valued and integrated into each component. Finally, the focus is on those complex conditions which either facilitate success or lead to and compound risk for children, youth and families, not the symptoms or easy fixes.

Historical Context of CYFAR
Established in 1991, the Children, Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) National Initiative was CSREES’ response to conditions that place children and their families at risk. Strategic planners, program developers, evaluators and researchers recognized that significant changes were needed to develop, implement and evaluate quality programs which address critical issues for our nation’s families.

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The CYFAR vision is of families and communities in America in which children and youth lead positive, secure, and happy young lives while developing the skills, knowledge, and competencies necessary for fulfilling, contributing adult lives.

The mission of the CYFAR Program is to integrate resources of the Land Grant University Cooperative Extension System to develop and deliver educational programs that equip limited resource families and youth who are at risk for not meeting basic human needs, to lead positive, productive, contributing lives.

Ongoing since 1991, CSREES provides funding to support community-based programs for at risk children, youth and families. While the audience is at risk, the strategies employed emphasize positive youth and family development. While problems must be addressed, it is a commitment to development and building competencies that promotes growth and success.

**Organization of this Research for CYFAR Programming**

This document provides research for CYFAR programming in the following sections. First, assumptions are explicitly stated that guide the work of both practitioners and researchers to promote successful outcomes, prevent negative outcomes and intervene when problems are evident. Assumptions about individuals, families, communities, programs, and the relationships between theory and research are stated to set the stage for how the research base has been searched, presented, and may be used.

The next section provides the heart of the published research to date (mid-2003) that undergirds the CYFAR work of Extension. Six key components of successful and effective programs are presented. These six components relate to and support the ten Extension Strategies described in the CYFAR Philosophy.

**Successful and Effective Programs:**

1. Are guided by program theory in their development, implementation, evaluation and sustainability;
2. Involve participants and their families in meaningful ways;
3. Are comprehensive to meet the multiple needs of individuals, families, and communities;
4. Create supportive environments for children, youth, and families;
5. Promote resiliency in individuals, families, and communities; and
6. Are characterized by collaboration among individuals, agencies, and organizations.

**Assumptions of Evidenced-Based Practice**

These assumptions provide the backdrop for the tenets of the CYFAR research base.

**Individuals**

- Continually develop and change
- Respond to external forces, whether they be threats or supports
Are surrounded by complex pressures and circumstances
Possess both needs and assets
Can benefit from proactive youth and family development, prevention and intervention efforts

Families
- Continually develop and change
- Respond to external forces, whether they be threats or supports
- Are surrounded by complex pressures and circumstances
- Possess both needs and assets
- Can benefit from proactive youth and family development, prevention and intervention efforts
- Typically provide a safe context for individual development
- Have a substantial influence on human development, both positive and negative

Communities
- Continually develop and change
- Respond to external forces, whether they be threats or supports
- Are surrounded by complex pressures and circumstances
- Possess both needs and assets
- Can benefit from proactive youth and family development, prevention and intervention efforts
- Influence both individual and family development
- Have the potential to foster resilience in families
- Can be strengthened so that families are safer, more productive, and resilient
- Possess a collective strength that often is untapped and underdeveloped

Community-Based Programs
- Have the potential to support individuals, families, and communities
- Can be positioned to foster positive community effects on individuals and families
- Can contribute to a community’s capacity to achieve positive, desired goals
- Benefit from research and evaluation evidence that is directly tied to program goals
- Benefit from program theory that informs research and evaluation

Program Theory and Research
- Provide the rationale for program development, including specifying program goals and their related activities
- Provide a basis on which more informed evaluation can be based
- Contribute to examining program accountability and success
- Connect program implementation with social science-based information
- Enable program professionals to more effectively understand the nature of prevention and intervention efforts
Components of Successful and Effective Programs Supported in the Research Literature

The following six factors are critical components of successful and effective programs for children, youth, and families at risk. Each of these six components are explained and supported by relevant literature citations in the following manner. A brief description of the component is followed by several key points taken from the professional literature, with citations. Selected references that may be useful for Extension personnel as they develop, implement, and evaluate their programs are then listed. At the end of the document, a more extensive list of references is provided.

1. **Successful community-based programs are informed by program theory that provides guidance on program development, implementation, evaluation, and sustainability.**

   The chances of program success are increased when planning is organized and intentional. Program theory provides a framework that can guide the assessment of needs and assets within a community and among its members, the establishment of desired program results, the determination of prevention and intervention activities that are connected to the desired results, and the understanding of when program initiatives are successful. Program theory can inform and support all phases of program processes, including evaluation and sustainability. Simply stated, program theory is a way to articulate what the program is expected to do for program participants, as well as the steps that are involved in accomplishing program goals.

   Evaluation is essential for successful programming as it allows documentation of what happens in the program, informs about which strategies work best, and assesses the short-term and long-term outcomes of the program.

   Sustainability is the capacity of programs to continuously respond to identified community issues. A sustained program maintains a focus consonant with its original goals and objectives, including the individuals, families, and communities it was originally intended to serve. Funding providers and the professionals who receive their funds are obligated to work toward sustaining existing programs.

**Points from the Literature:**

**Program Theory**

- Program theory makes explicit the assumptions that we have about why something will make a difference, and then helps us determine how that change will occur (Mancini, McCollum, Huebner, & Marek, in press). Program theory is a roadmap for program professionals, and provides details that are needed to develop, implement, monitor, and evaluate successful programs.
There is “nothing as practical as good theory” (Pawson, 2003; Weiss, 1995). Program theory is practical and has high utility for those who are developing programs; it is a primary method for understanding a community-based program.

Program theory facilitates cumulating evaluation results into a richer understanding of what the program is accomplishing (Weiss, 1995). As a framework, program theory helps to organize what is known about what is happening because of a program, and ultimately assists in knowing where adjustments should be made.

A good program theory is plausible, doable, and testable (Connell & Kubisch, 1998). It answers the questions of, “Do these ideas make sense?”, “Can we actually do what we have in mind?”, and “Are there ways we can show that positive changes are due to our program?”

Program theory increases knowledge about flaws in ideas about what should work, and flaws in implementing a program (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004).

Program theory increases the understanding of the outside influences on a program, helps to determine when a program is “ready” to be evaluated, and helps in doing evaluations that can be readily utilized by program professionals (Mancini, Marek, Byrne, & Huebner, in press; Myers-Walls, 2000).

Program Evaluation

“Evaluation is intended for use” (Weiss, 1998, p. 15). Evaluation results allow one to make informed decisions about the program’s value, capitalize on program strengths, and fine-tune the program to increase its effectiveness (Callor, Betts, Carter, Marczak, Peterson, & Richmond, 2000).

Evaluation has different purposes at various stages in the life of a program (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). When planning a program, evaluation assesses the extent of a social problem and the need for the program to assist with program design. During a program, evaluation can show how successfully the program is reaching its target population with its resources, services, and benefits. Impact evaluations estimate the effects of the program. Evaluation also provides an assessment of the cost-effectiveness of a program.

Program development and evaluation go hand in hand. An evaluator should be familiar with the social issues being addressed very early and then should learn what actually happens in the program, how program staff interact with participants, and how the program plans to affect change (Weiss, 1998). This helps the evaluator understand the issues the evaluation should address, design relevant questions, utilize appropriate data collection methods, and appropriately interpret the meaning of outcome data.

Quantitative and qualitative methods are seen as complementary approaches in evaluation as both types have strengths and weaknesses.
When appropriate, multiple methods should be utilized (Patton, 1986) as they enhance understanding and interpretation of the data (Weiss, 1998).

**Program Sustainability**

- Once a program makes an impact in the community, there is an “ethical” obligation to sustain that program (Akerlund, 2000). However, Lerner (1995) and Little (1995) report that many community-based programs fail to sustain within a few years after their initial funding ceases.
- Currently the research literature cites a growing need for sustainability planning, but the actual literature on program sustainability is emergent and the systematic study of the components of sustainability is limited (e.g., Bamberger & Cheema, 1990; Mancini & Marek, 1998; Marek, Mancini, & Brock, 1999; Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998) leaving programmers with little information to guide them through this difficult process.
- A systematic sustainability study was conducted on community-based programs and seven elements were noted as contributing to sustaining programs (Mancini & Marek, in press; 2003): leadership competence, effective collaboration, understanding the community, demonstrating program results, strategic funding, staff involvement and integration, and program responsivity.

**Useful References for Program Professionals:**


**Useful On-line Resources:**
The CYFERnet website’s Evaluation section includes practical tools that you can use to evaluate community-based programs; information on how community programs can be sustained; and assessments of organizational support for work in the areas of children, youth, and families. To reach the CYFERnet website, go to: [http://www.cyfernet.org](http://www.cyfernet.org)


The Evaluation Exchange newsletter by the Harvard Family Research Project is published 3-4 times each year and is available free of charge on-line or in print. To see the newsletters, go to: [http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval.html).

The University of Wisconsin-Extension Cooperative Extension Program Development and Evaluation Unit has produced several useful resources available at [http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/index.html](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/index.html).

United Way’s Outcome Measurement Resource Network is an on-line resource with information, documents, and links pertaining to the measurement of program and community outcomes. Access their website at http://national.unitedway.org/outcomes/.

2. **Successful programs involve participants and their families in meaningful ways.**

Involvement of participants and their families, in meaningful ways, at all stages of program development is more likely to meet participant and community needs, to be accepted, to elicit feelings of ownership, and to last beyond the life of the initial funding.

**Points from the Literature:**

- Developing meaningful one-to-one relationships and providing services “respectfully, ungrudgingly & collaboratively” is an essential attribute of effective programs for at-risk children and families (Schorr & Both, 1991).
- Successful programs provide the opportunity for program leaders and youth to develop meaningful relationships. It is important for program leaders to show they really care about the youth involved in their programs by creating an environment that conveys the adults’ beliefs in youth (Hellison, 2000; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).
- Ideal services are characterized by professionals working together with families to create a shared philosophy, determine needs and priorities, and agree on the roles and relationships necessary to address the identified issues efficiently and successfully (Erwin & Rainforth, 1996).
- Parent involvement helps increase the likelihood of long-term program effects, particularly for early childhood programs. Parent involvement both at home and in school appears to be a good predictor of school success (Reynolds, 1998).
- Viewing “youth as resources” provides youth with ways to make a difference while providing them clear benefits and healthier communities (Checkoway, 1998).

**Useful References for Program Professionals:**


3. **Successful programs must be comprehensive to meet the multiple needs of individuals, families, and communities.**

Successful programs address multiple needs of participants as well as the complex interactions between participants and their larger environment.

**Points from the Literature:**

- Effective interventions incorporate two or more of the following components of positive youth development in their programs: 1) bonding, 2) resilience, 3) social, emotional, cognitive, and moral competence, 4) self-determination, 5) spirituality, 6) self-efficacy, 7) identity, 8) belief in the future, 9) recognition of positive behaviors, and 10) opportunities for prosocial involvement (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002). These components are best addressed within the larger context of society thereby integrating efforts aimed at changing individuals, social and physical environments, communities, and policies (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Freudenberg, Eng, Flay, Parcel, Rogers, & Wallerstein, 1995).

- Reynolds (1998) states that programs must provide for the “whole” individual, including services that focus on physical health, nutrition, social, psychological, emotional, and educational needs. Examples of services include: 1) health screenings, 2) social services, 3) parent education, 4) curriculum based programming, and 5) school/community outreach services. More specifically, effective youth prevention programs are child centered and promote parent involvement.

- Programmers must understand the impact of society upon the individual and conduct programming that simultaneously provides services to the participants, their families and peers, schools, and/or the larger communities (Coie, Watt, West, Hawkins, Asarnow, Markman, Ramey, Shure, & Long, 1993).

- Schorr and Both (1991) stress the importance of accounting for different points in life cycle stages when providing comprehensive family services. Effective interventions not only take into account the culture these individuals live, but also the generational gap between children and their parents.

**Useful References for Program Professionals:**

Coie, J. D., Watt, N. F., West, S. G., Hawkins, J. D., Asarnow, J. R.,
The science of prevention: A conceptual framework and some
directions for a national research program. *American
Psychologist, 48*(10), 1013-1022.

Eccles, J. & Gootman, J.A. (2002). *Community programs to promote

Freudenberg, N., Eng, E., Flay, B., Parcel, G., Rogers, T., & Wallerstein,
N. (1995). Strengthening individual and community capacity to
prevent disease and promote health: In search of relevant theories

and families at risk: Research-based principles to promote long-
term effectiveness. *Children and Youth Services Review, 20*(6),
503-523.

young children: A brief survey of current knowledge and its
implications for program and policy development. In L. B. Schorr
& D. Both (Eds.), *Effective services for young children: Report of
a workshop* (pp. 23-47). Washington, DC: National Academy
Press.

4. **Successful programs create supportive environments for
children, youth and families.**

Creating a supportive environment is an important component of program
delivery because supportive environments increase participant retention,
provide an optimal environment for learning to take place, promote
individuals’ feelings of belonging, and provide participants with
relationships that can serve as protective factors during times of stress.

**Points from the Literature:**
- A supportive environment is one in which participants feel welcome,
safe, are valued for their unique characteristics and strengths, and are
challenged to develop new skills and competencies (Catalano et al.,
2002; Delgado, 2002; Dryfoos, 1993; Eccles & Gootman, 2002;
Freudenberg et al., 1995).
- Critical components of a supportive environment include: 1) nurturing,
consistent relationships between program providers and participants,
and between participants (Catalano et al., 2002; Eccles & Gootman,
2002;); 2) well trained staff who are able to communicate effectively
and are knowledgeable about child/human development (Eccles &
Gootman, 2002; Reynolds, 1998; Schorr & Both, 1991) so that
expectations for participants are clear, realistic and high (Delgado,
2002; Hellison & Cutforth, 1997); and 3) a physically and
psychologically safe environment, that is structured and includes age
appropriate monitoring and is easily accessible to participants (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; White, 1995).

- Close relationships can serve as buffers in times of stress, can promote quicker recovery from stressors, and can increase the likelihood of positive outcomes following stressful events (Masten, 1990).
- To provide supportive environments, program staff members may be called upon to invest intensive individualized attention in participants, therefore, the ratio of staff to participants should be small (Dryfoos, 1990; Hellison & Cutforth, 1997; Reynolds, 1998).
- Programs that involve intergenerational mentoring can serve to promote positive youth development, as well as strengthen community ties (Delgado, 2002; Hamburg, 1992). Potential mentors can include high school students, college students, or members of an older generation.

**Useful References for Program Professionals:**


**5. Effective programs promote resiliency in individuals, families, and communities.**

Effective programs identify and support the strengthening of existing protective factors and assets of program participants (including those at the individual, family and community levels), and also encourage the building of new assets and skills that will aid individuals and families in times of stress.

**Points from the Literature:**
- Risk factors are those phenomena that are associated with poor outcomes. These factors include: poverty, perinatal stress, family instability due to factors such as chronic conflict, parental alcoholism, or parental mental illness (Werner, 1995).
- Protective factors weaken the relationship between risk factors and negative outcomes (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). According to
Rutter (1987), protective factors accomplish this in one of four ways: 1) reducing the impact of risk on individuals, 2) reducing the negative chain reactions that can result from exposure to risk factors, 3) creating and/or maintaining feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy during times of stress, or 4) introducing opportunities to individuals.

- Risk and protective factors must be identified in relation to the developmental stages and tasks of the individuals being served (Catalano et al., 2002; Lewis, 1990; Werner, 1993). To address the needs of all participants, programs should target multiple skill areas instead of focusing narrowly on the acquisition of one skill set (Delgado, 2002; Dryfoos, 1993). Program delivery should be specific to the setting and participants (Freudenberg et al., 1995).

- Individual level protective factors identified by Werner (1993) are: an easy-going temperament in infancy; autonomy exhibited during the pre-school years; an ability to get along with classmates in elementary school; a positive self-concept and an internal locus of control in adolescence; and an achievement-orientation and confidence in one’s own abilities in adulthood.

- Family level protective factors identified are: two or more years between siblings, the absence of long separations from the primary caregiver during the first year of life, household responsibilities, and structure and explicit rules. In adulthood resilient individuals enjoyed a supportive relationship with their mate (Werner, 1993).

- Identified community level protective factors are: the ability to find supportive relationships outside of the family of origin (friends, mentors, teachers, etc.), engagement in extracurricular activities during the school years, and the ability to take advantage of opportunities at major life transitions (Werner, 1993).

Useful References for Program Professionals:


6. **Working collaboratively with individuals and/or organizations can enhance program success and thus more effectively support the needs of children, youth, families, and communities.**

Since the challenges and problems faced by families are multidimensional, it is difficult for any one organization to address all issues. Thus groups must work together to maximize the services available for families and to
achieve successful outcomes. Collaborative working relationships can reduce duplication of efforts, bring multiple human and financial resources to address multiple needs, create higher quality programs, and lead to a comprehensive system of care, information exchange, and support for children, youth, families, and communities.

**Points from the Literature:**

- When individuals and organizations work together, the likelihood of having services that are duplicated, fragmented, inaccessible, or inferior are significantly reduced (Bailey & Koney, 1996; Benjamin, 1996; Erwin & Rainforth, 1996). These working relationships often lead to the development of new programs to fill newly identified gaps (Benjamin, 1996). Community and consumer participation are needed so that new and existing services will adequately address the individuality and uniqueness of communities (Bailey & Koney, 1996).

- In a study of collaboration in the early child care and education field, participants from various organizations described various benefits of collaboration: high quality services, increased resource utilization, expanded training opportunities, legislation advancements, and exemplary program and practice development (Kagan & Rivera, 1991).

- Each member in collaboration brings his or her own knowledge, skills, values, and commitment to the group. This diverse combination can be creatively used in a collaboration to ensure that programs are successful and empowering (Vaughn, 1994).

- In a review of recommendations synthesized from reports prepared by foundations, councils, government agencies, and other national groups, Daka-Mulwanda, Thornburg, Filbert, and Klein (1995) describe a need for both horizontal and vertical collaboration. Horizontal collaboration refers to groups at one level (such as local) working together, while vertical collaboration crosses levels (such as local, state, and federal).

**Useful References for Program Professionals:**


Summary

Successful programs that have a positive impact on individuals, families, and communities are informed by systematic theory development and research. A primary goal of CYFAR is to equip community-based programs with research-based information that is directly related to pivotal aspects of program success. Successful programs are usually not serendipitous but emerge from intensive, sustained, intentional efforts by program professionals. Program theory is a linchpin for program, evaluation, and sustainability planning. Program development and implementation, evaluation strategies, and sustainability planning are the major aspects of program processes. Each is informed by research-based information that enables program professionals to avoid pitfalls and to enhance success. Successful community-based programs involve participants in multiple aspects of program processes, are multi-layered, build supportive environments, promote resiliency, and utilize collaboration to meet their goals of supporting children, youth and families at risk.
References


