

# Incorporating Family Engagement in Middle School Out-of-School Time Programs

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In recent years, both in-school and out-of-school time (OST) programs have increasingly emphasized family engagement. Studies show that engaged parents can have long-lasting positive impacts on their children's success in school, particularly for middle school youth (ages 10–14). Just as many schools are working to promote family engagement, Catholic Social Services of Philadelphia has successfully integrated their research-based Strengthening Families Program (SFP) into existing OST programs. The SFP/OST program is a unique and innovative approach to family engagement, inspiring and empowering parents to be more involved in their children's education and to become active stewards in their emotional and relational development as well.

When engaging parents and caregivers, OST programs have generally faced the same challenges that most schools do: lack of time and lack of staff specifically trained and dedicated to that task. But the often overlooked first step of effective family engagement

programming is to define what family engagement should look like and base the programming model on this definition. Traditionally employed outreach methods—newsletters, open houses, parent advisory councils and family social nights—provide some opportunities for interaction and communication with parents and families, but often do not effectively engage them in their children’s education or lives. This is particularly true for middle school programs, where OST staff typically have less face-to-face contact with the parents of their students.

To move beyond superficial engagement with families, OST programs thus require a framework that specifies what effective family engagement is and how to implement it. To this end, the Catholic Social Services (CSS) OST programs have taken a proactive approach, adopting the National Institute on Out of School Time (NIOST) definition of family engagement: “embedded relationship building and collaboration that recognizes parent’s status as equal partners in their children’s education and development” (emphasis added) (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2014).

The middle school years are very often challenging, for both youth and their parents. As youth deal with significant physiological changes and social pressures, their parents struggle to find supportive ways to help them navigate these behavioral and attitudinal changes. During this critical developmental period, children can

become less interested in school, while at the same time, parents may grow less engaged with their children at home. By strengthening family engagement, we can help youth to significantly improve all their relationships, acquire important new life skills and engage in the learning process. Developing these critical skills requires a more robust approach that connects the interventions of an out-of-school time program with a relationship-focused approach to strengthening family engagement.

Typically, OST programs are strongly youth focused, with staff selection, training and task delegation focused primarily on planning and implementing activities for the children who attend them. Integrating a meaningful parent and family engagement process thus requires significantly broadening the scopes of the philosophy, operations and leadership of the typical OST program.

To do this, Catholic Social Services drew on its history of high-quality parent education and support programs. In its work with parents and families generally, CSS has embraced and successfully implemented the Strengthening Families Program, an evidence-based curriculum developed by Karol Kumpfer and associates at the University of Utah (Kumpfer, Molgaard, & Spoth, 1996). This curriculum consists of targeted programs for parents and families with three- to five-year-olds and six- to eleven-year-olds, and it is being used as part of the citywide parenting collaborative. With solid experience providing both quality parenting education and excellent

OST programs, CSS now hoped to integrate these two programming models.

In 2013, CSS designed an innovative approach that integrates the Strengthening Families framework into its OST programs. By offering the Strengthening Families program for middle school students and their families (SFP 10–14), and coupling this curriculum with a comprehensive system of parent supports and staff engagement, CSS has moved beyond the traditional model of family engagement programming. The SFP/OST program is specifically designed to engage family members with each other, with other families and with the OST staff. Other family engagement initiatives that offer stand-alone parenting classes focus solely on parenting skills. By comparison, this program supports the entire family system by effectively fostering and modeling positive relationships and interactions. Program participants develop leadership and advocacy skills as parents, and come to view OST staff as partners in their children's development.

The success of the SFP/OST program begins with the SFP 10-14 curriculum. This curriculum, first authored by Virginia Molgaard, is a revision of the Kumpfer model and was developed for Project Family, a research endeavor of the Center for Family Research at Iowa State University (ISU) (ISU, 1994; Spoth & Molgaard, 1999). The SFP 10-14 curriculum focuses on reducing family-related risk

factors associated with adolescent problem behaviors and building protective factors into the lives of young adolescents and their caregivers. Curriculum goals include preventing teen substance use and other problem behaviors, strengthening parenting skills and building family resources for ongoing application of program learning (<http://www.strengtheningfamiliesprogram.org/>). A proposal submitted to The Children's Trust Fund in May 2013 resulted in CSS's being selected to receive funding for this program for a three-year cycle.

In the program, parents and youth first meet separately and later together as families over the course of seven sessions. The program sessions assist parents in developing and maintaining connections with each other, and also strengthen relationships between the OST service provider and the parents. In addition, four sets of booster sessions (for parent feedback and reinforcement) are held a few weeks after the original seven sessions. These sessions provide information, resources and support to parents, link families to services and opportunities in their local communities and identify families who may be in crisis or who may show early warning signs of child abuse and neglect.

A number of studies conducted by Conger and colleagues (Conger, Conger, & Elder, 1997; Conger, Conger, Elder, Lorenz, Simons, & Whitbeck, 1993; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, Simons, & Whitbeck, 1992) concluded that children at this tender developmental stage do better

when their parents/caregivers exhibit and regularly exercise two basic skills: consistent discipline and consistent support. The integration of the SFP 10-14 curriculum into OST programs builds those key parenting skills in an innovative and unique way by:

- Fostering opportunities for stronger and more regular family engagement
- Increasing interaction and relationship building among parents and OST program staff
- Utilizing the Strengthening Families framework, which helps parents build the skills necessary to actively relate and engage with their children
- Incorporating the five protective factors
- Aligning with the Department of Human Services (DHS) goals for middle school students in OST programs, which are: improved life skills, improved relationships and increased levels of engagement in learning and school

As public and private OST funders began emphasizing the need for family engagement, few programs provided context or opportunities to identify what that engagement should look like, what it should produce or what preferred strategies might be considered. CSS is confident that it has indeed found an innovative approach to engaging families in its OST programs, an approach that helps middle school students—and their parents—to not simply survive but thrive and flourish.

Thus far, the SFP/OST initiative has demonstrated its ability to produce identifiable outcomes and achieve established benchmarks and goals. The responses from parents, youth and staff have all been extremely positive. Remarkably, of the 62 families (71 parents and 76 children) participating in the program, none have withdrawn, and all have either graduated or are expected to graduate. By comparison, a family engagement program for parents with younger children implemented as part of the Parenting Collaborative has a 48% graduation rate. Additionally, the SFP/OST initiative benefits from outside observation and feedback. The Center for Schools and Communities monitors the program for quality and fidelity and evaluates outcomes. The Philadelphia DHS evaluates the family engagement aspects of the program. It is clear that this robust approach to family engagement greatly increases the chance of reaching caregivers and meeting the educational and developmental goals set for our youth.

The integration of SFP 10-14 into OST programs is easily replicable, and is adaptable to a variety of neighborhood and family cultures. With properly trained staff, the curriculum is easy to use. It is also available in various languages, and thus can be conducted in a culturally sensitive manner. The cost per family for the 11-session program (seven initial and four booster sessions) is between \$500 and \$800, a worthwhile investment given the potential impact on children and their families. Though

the program is still in the early stage of implementation, early results show that the impact on individual families has been inspiring. As one parent commented at a recent program graduation ceremony: "I was at my wits end. This program saved my child's life!"

## **References**

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