

Child and Parent Voices on a Community-Based Prevention Program (FAST)

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Abstract

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is a collaborative program involving schools, families, and community-based partners in efforts to prevent substance use, juvenile delinquency, school failure, child abuse and neglect, mental health problems, and violence. Although evaluated extensively, there remains a dearth of qualitative data on child and parent perceptions of the FAST program. The present study helps to fill that gap with the implementation and evaluation of the FAST program using two school communities in Central Virginia. Qualitative data were collected via child focus groups and parent open-ended survey responses. Data were analyzed using a process called Concept Mapping. The results of this research are used to identify key strengths of the program components as well as potential adjustments to implementation arising from the views of child and parent participants. Particular attention is paid to the one-on-one “special play” as viewed from the target and non-target child. Relevance of these findings to the implementation and evaluation of other school–community programs are discussed.

Key Words: prevention, children, Families and Schools Together, parents, community, FAST program, voices, participants, family perspectives, qualitative

Introduction

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is a community-based, multifamily support program which begins with eight weeks of family sessions and then

transitions into a two-year follow up segment called FASTWORKS (McDonald et al., 1997). The program involves families of children ages five to twelve who request participation or have been identified by their schools as being at risk for academic failure and social problems. Developed in 1988 by Dr. Lynn McDonald, FAST is based on well-known theories of family systems, child development, and risk resiliency. The primary goals of the program are to enhance family functioning, prevent substance abuse by the child and family, expand social relationships, increase parent involvement in school, improve parent–child relationships, prevent school failure, and improve child behavior (McDonald, Frank, & Price, 2006). FAST is backed by more than 15 years of evaluative research and has received recognition as an effective program from national organizations such as the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP, n.d.) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2003).

FAST has earned the designation of an effective program due to years of research documenting its effectiveness across diverse populations. Recent studies have found it to be adaptable and effective with diverse cultural and ethnic groups such as European (McDonald, FitzRoy, Fuchs, Fooker, & Klasen, 2012), immigrant Latino (Guerra & Knox, 2008), low-income urban Latino (McDonald, Moberg, et al., 2006), and American Indian families and children (Kratochwill, McDonald, Levin, Bear-Tibbetts, & Demaray, 2004). The latest FAST evaluations have demonstrated program effects on important outcomes, namely, prevention of child aggressive behavior (Guerra & Knox, 2008; Knox, Guerra, Williams, & Toro, 2011), promotion of child prosocial behavior (Crozier, Rokutani, Russett, Godwin, & Banks, 2010), enhancement of parent–child communication (Knox et al., 2011), and reduction of family stress (Ackley & Cullen, 2010).

Evaluations of FAST, however, have not all demonstrated program success across all outcomes. For example, Knox and colleagues (2011) found no differences in aggression between FAST and control group children. Layzer, Goodson, Creps, Werner, and Bernstein (2001) observed no differences in teachers' report of positive changes in children who participated in FAST as compared to those in a control group, despite the fact that FAST parents reported improved behavior. In addition, there were few significant differences between FAST and control families in the year following completion of the program (Layzer et al., 2001). Moberg and colleagues (2003) conducted a two-year randomized trial of FAST and observed significant improvements in academic outcomes but few other significant differences between the FAST and control children.

When proven preventive interventions fail to produce anticipated program effects, evaluators often examine issues related to fidelity of implementation and consumer (participant) experience (e.g., Olds, Sadler, & Kitzman, 2007). Fidelity has been defined as the degree to which programs are implemented as program developers intended (e.g., Fagan et al., 2011). Programs differ in terms of how much of the program can be adapted and still retain a high degree of effectiveness. According to the program developers (McDonald et al., 2012), 60% of FAST can be adapted. Core components make up only 40% of the group processes, lending a fair amount of room for local adaptations. FAST teams are actually encouraged by the developers to adapt the program to the needs of the community they are serving as one way of respecting the cultural values of the participants. Therefore, a need exists for a systematic method of determining which, if any, adaptations should be made by FAST teams.

A few recent evaluations have attempted to address this need by collecting qualitative program feedback from FAST parents. Knox and colleagues (Knox et al., 2011) conducted two parent focus groups in which FAST parents reported, after participation in FAST, that they were better able to relate to and communicate with their children, and they saw improved behavior particularly among their older children. Similarly, Ackley and Cullen (2010) used the open-ended parent comments provided as part of the FAST, Inc. Evaluation Report as evidence of consumer satisfaction. With the exception of these two publications, there remains a dearth of research on parent perspectives of the FAST program, and there is no research on the FAST process and outcomes from the voice of child participants.

The scarcity of qualitative data on child and parent perceptions of the FAST program exists despite evidence to suggest that the success of a program depends in large part on the degree to which parents' and children's concerns and motivations are integrated into the implementation design (Olds et al., 2007). The current study contributes to the FAST research base by being the first to assess and analyze the child, as well as parent, perspectives of the program from two community implementations.

The first aim of this paper is to examine child qualitative feedback on the FAST program. The authors have particular interest in child perceptions regarding the "special play" that is a core component of the FAST program. During "special play," a designated target child participates in one-on-one, parent-mediated play, while the non-target children engage in supervised free-play (McDonald et al., 1997). The play period lasts 15 minutes, and parents are instructed to focus on child-initiated play without directing or criticizing. Parents are encouraged to continue "special play" between FAST sessions and over the next 2 years. It was hypothesized that non-target siblings would have

negative reactions to not being the “special play” child and may feel jealous of the special time that the target child experiences with the parent. Therefore, child focus group interviews were conducted separately with target and non-target children. These qualitative data are expected to provide valuable insight on the child FAST experience that can be used to make adaptations to the FAST sessions and potentially impact outcomes of all participating children.

A second aim of this paper is to summarize the qualitative data that is typically collected at the end of a FAST cycle as “parent comments” on the Kids FAST evaluation questionnaire (McDonald & Creer, 2012, 2013). Parents are asked to rate their satisfaction with the FAST program and experience with the FAST target child. These data provide important information about unmeasured outcomes and ideas for future program implementation from the parent perspective.

Method

Participants

Participants were children and parents/grandparents from two communities near Richmond, Virginia. Nine families participated in the FAST program at an elementary school in an urban community. Eleven families participated at a second school that is located in a rural community. Demographic characteristics of evaluation participants are presented in Table 1. Some families were not in attendance when focus groups and questionnaires were conducted; therefore, the values in Table 1 reflect a subset of program participants at each site.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Group	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Target (“Special Play”) Children	38.5% (5) male 61.5% (8) female	Mean: 8.08 Mode: 8.00 Range: 6–11	100% African American
Non-Target Children	55.6% (5) male 44.4% (4) female	Mean: 9.67 Mode: 8.00 Range: 7–13	100% African American
Parents/ Guardians	25% (4) male 62.5% (10) female 12.5% (2) missing	Mean: 37.85 Mode: ≤ 32 Range: ≤ 32 – ≥ 32	69% African Amer. 6.3% Amer. Indian/ Alaskan Native 12.5% Caucasian/ White

Design and Procedure

Child Procedures and Parent Consent

All questions, consent forms, and procedures for this study were approved by a review committee of the sponsoring community organization and the partnering school. The evaluator and FAST coordinators worked together to develop focus group guidelines and eight questions with prompts for the child focus groups. At the beginning of each FAST cycle, the evaluator met with parents at both sites to discuss the child focus group questions and procedures. Parents were able to ask questions and provide parental consent for their children to participate via written consent. Although the children at each site did not meet the evaluator at that time, they saw her interacting with the FAST coordinators and parents.

At the last session of the FAST cycle, the evaluator conducted two separate child focus groups at each community site: one for the target/“special play” children and one for the non-target children. Focus groups were selected as the data collection strategy for two important reasons: (1) to minimize any child discomfort related to meeting alone with an unknown adult, and (2) to maximize child interactions which can lead to rich data (Horowitz et al., 2003; Stafstrom, Havlena, & Krezinski, 2012). Focus groups were held in a classroom or cafeteria of the school that hosted the FAST program the children were attending; thus, the environment was familiar to them. The evaluator and introduction to the focus groups were presented to the children by the FAST facilitators who had worked with the children during the FAST cycle. The evaluator/focus group facilitator was well trained in focus group methods and had more than 20 years of experience interacting with diverse groups of children in school and community programs.

Children were asked to provide feedback on the FAST program in their own words. Several steps were taken to prevent socially desirable responses, including: (1) explanation regarding the confidentiality of responses, (2) use of focus group questions that illicit both positive and negative valuations of the program/experiences, (3) assurance that “there are no right or wrong answers,” and (4) validation of all child responses, positive or negative. The child focus group questions mirror the open-ended questions completed by parents on the adult evaluation survey. The evaluator took notes and audio recorded the focus groups, which each took about 30 minutes to complete. Audio recordings were deleted after transcription.

The questions with prompts were:

1. What did you like most about FAST? What do you enjoy most that involves the entire family?

2. What did you like least about FAST? What did you not like?
3. What would you change about the program if we were to start over? What would you add to the program? What would you take out?
4. Do you ever think about FAST on non-FAST days? When? Can you give examples?
5. Has being in FAST changed anything between you and your family? Can you give examples of things that have changed?
6. Has being in FAST changed anything related to your friends? Has it changed how you make friends or how you communicate with friends?
7. What did you think of the “special play” time?
8. Can you tell me anything that happened in your life as a result of participating in FAST?

Adult Procedures

At the end of each FAST cycle, parents completed a questionnaire that is part of the Kids FAST evaluation (McDonald & Creer, 2012, 2013). In addition to ratings on targeted program outcomes, parents provided open-ended feedback on program impact and what they enjoyed most and least about FAST. The questions are listed below:

1. What has been most valuable about your FAST experience?
2. What kind of changes have you seen in your FAST child since attending FAST?
3. Has the FAST program and/or team helped you? Please explain.
4. Has being in FAST changed your relationship in any way with the following?
 - FAST child
 - Spouse/partner
 - School personnel
 - Other FAST parents
 - Community agencies/organizations
5. What did you most enjoy about FAST?
6. What did you enjoy least about FAST?

Two additional questions asked about what the participant’s child enjoyed most and least about FAST, but because the children answered these questions for themselves, the parent responses are not presented here.

Analyses

The procedure used to analyze and organize the children’s focus group data and the open-ended parent feedback is known as Concept Mapping. This methodology is often used by social scientists and others to interpret qualitative input from multiple participants (Trochim, Cabrera, Milstein, Gallagher,

& Leischow, 2006; Trochim, Marcus, Mâsse, Moser, & Weld, 2008). The resulting “maps” provide a framework or structure for guiding action planning or, in this case, informing program developers and implementers of program components that seem to be working and those in need of revision or adaptation for a particular target group (e.g., school or community). Transcripts of the children’s focus groups and the parent open-ended feedback were reviewed by the evaluation team (i.e., evaluator and FAST coordinators), and responses were sorted into groups corresponding to the questions asked of the children and parents. Similar ideas or feedback were combined and given a descriptive label. A concept map (graphic illustration) was created for each of the three groups (i.e., target children, non-target children, and parents) to structure the concepts within the questions/categories. Relationships between concepts were represented with connecting arrows, and responses receiving multiple endorsements are presented in bold. Despite the urban/rural differences between the two FAST sites, qualitative feedback across the two sites was very similar. Therefore, the results presented are collapsed over sites as is recommended by the FAST developers (McDonald et al., 1997). The concept maps for target children, non-target children, and parents are presented in Figures 1–3.

Results

Target (“Special Play”) Children

Insights from the two groups of target children are depicted in Figure 1. Target children reported enjoying most aspects of the FAST program including gym/outside time, the dinners, spending time with family, the “special play” time, songs, and playing games. A few children reported not liking the “Hello” song, having to go home, “having to stop playing with [siblings] because of the ‘special play’ time,” and “having to go to the library and not go to the gym.” Suggested changes to the program were to add more free time to play with friends, increase the length of the program (i.e., the time of each session), and add more interesting songs. Improvements in parent/family relationships included being closer to family, better communication, getting along better, and doing more things together. Improvements in relationships with friends included better communication, respecting others, having more friends, choosing friends more wisely, and being able to speak up to bullies. “I am happy that I am playing with so many kids.” Changes in their lives as a result of participating in FAST were making better decisions, knowing how to control anger, getting smarter/better grades, being closer to family, and being happier. “Me and my family are closer.”

Figure 1: Target Child Concept Map

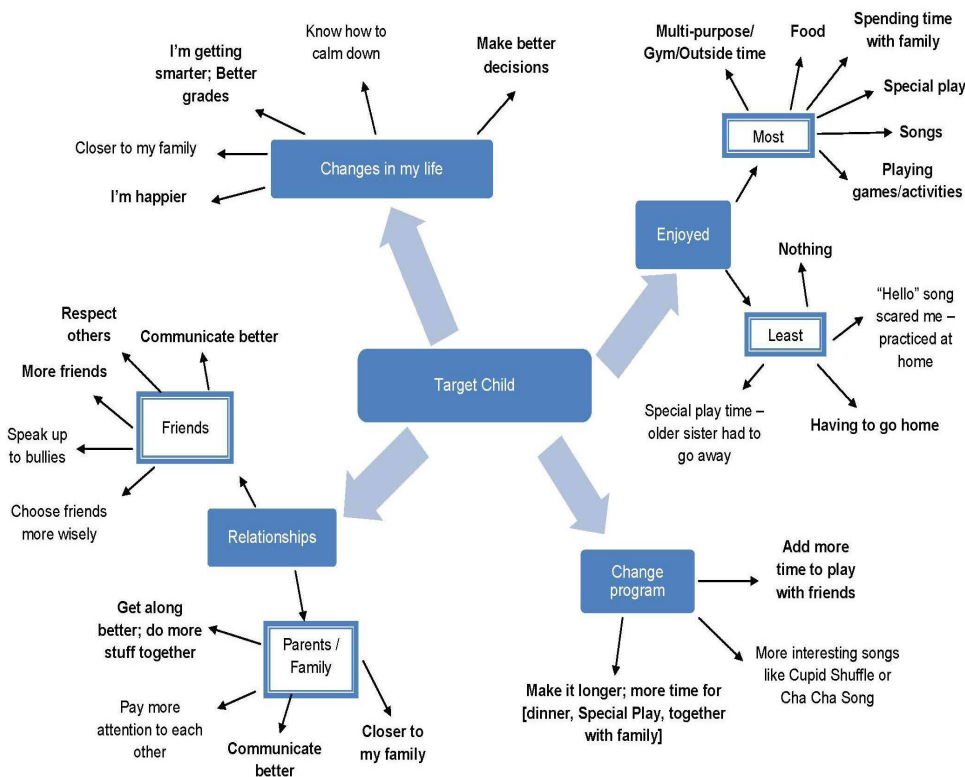


Figure 1. Target child concept map.

Non-Target Children

As illustrated in Figure 2, non-target children enjoyed being active/playing, getting help with homework, having fun conversations, playing games with their families, and talking about feelings. They did not like when the FAST routine had to be changed, and a few did not like having to do homework while attending a FAST session (because a parent said they must do it). Recommended changes were to make the program longer, provide healthier foods, and allow for more free time with parents to play games. Most non-target children reported having closer relationships with parents since participating in FAST, communicating more and better with family members, and treating family members better.

Since participating in FAST, non-target children reported being better at identifying friends, being a good friend, and communicating better. They felt they had a more positive attitude and handled conflict better as a result of the FAST program. They also reported having more friends, including friends they made through FAST.

When discussion turned to the “special play,” non-target child feedback was conflicted. Younger siblings stated that the “special play was not fair,” and “I was upset and mad that my brother got to go in there [for “special play”] with my mom.” Some reported dissatisfaction with not being able to play with the sibling because she/he had to leave a game or activity to attend the “special play” time: “I wanted to play with my brother, but he had to leave.” However, older non-target children, especially those who reported being the target child in previous FAST cycles, stated that “special play is fair because she [sibling] is younger.” They also explained that it was the younger sibling’s turn because “I had special play before.”

Figure 2: Non-Target Child Concept Map

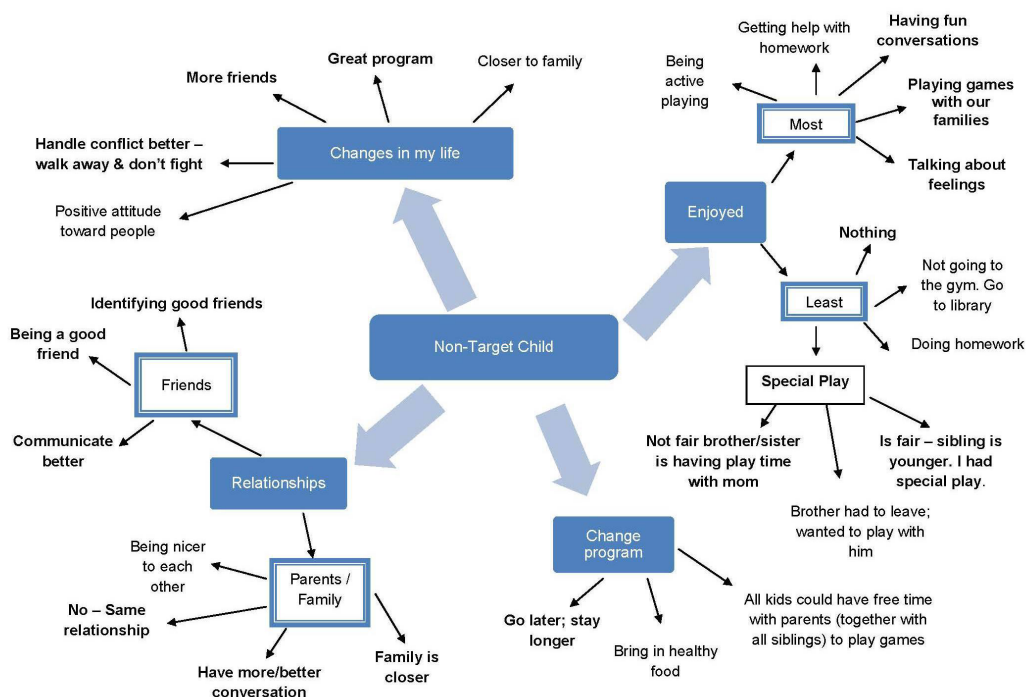


Figure 2. Non-target child concept map.

Parents

Overall themes identified from parent open-ended responses on the Kids FAST evaluation questionnaire (McDonald & Creer, 2012, 2013) are depicted in Figure 3. Parents enjoyed spending quality time with family members, the parent-only component, developing friendships with other parents, and “special play.” “The most valuable experience was [that] FAST helped me make time to read my kids’ story books to them and to listen to them more than before.” Parents were less fond of having the same session routine every week, and

Figure 3: Parents Concept Map

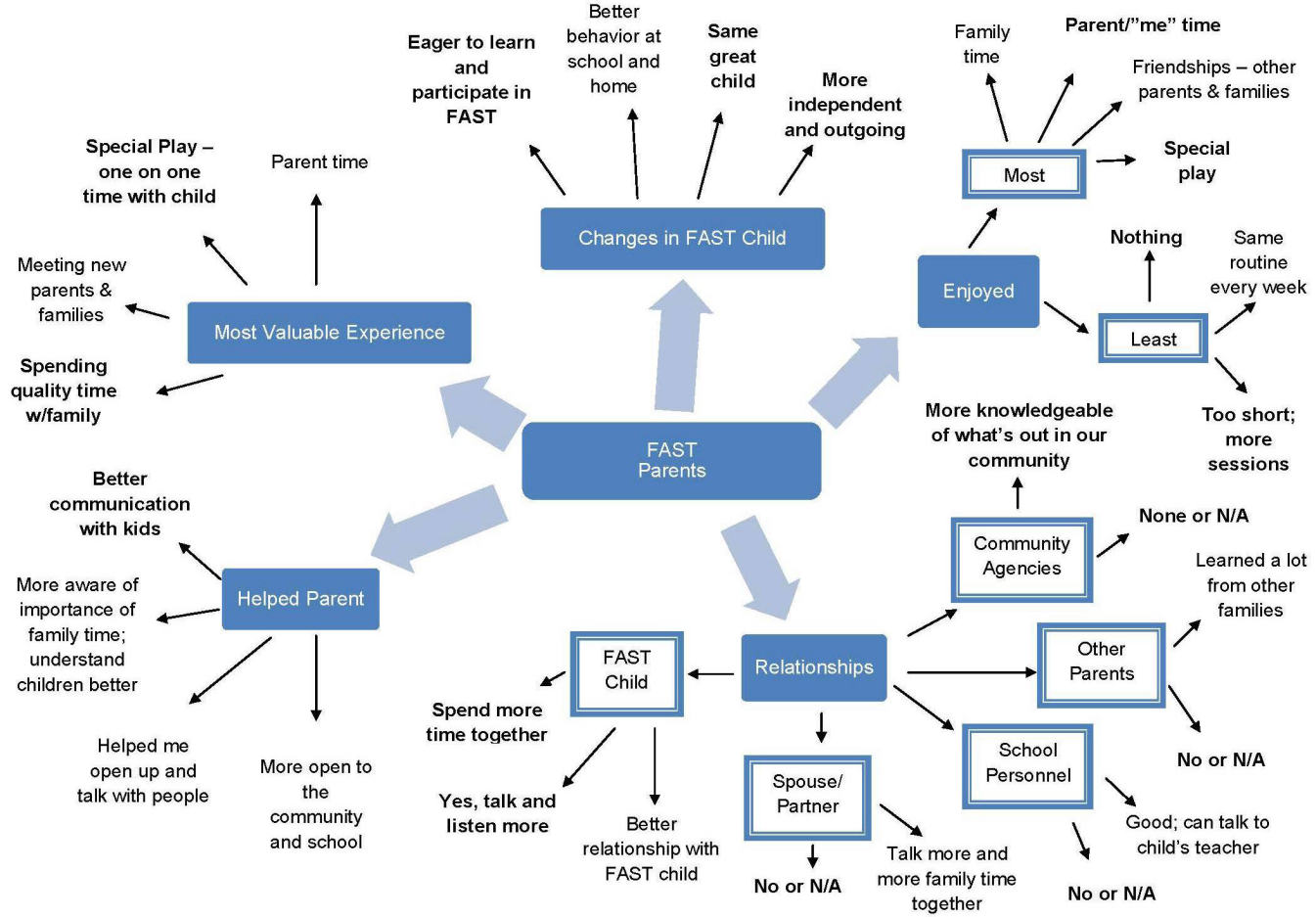


Figure 3. Parents concept map.

they thought that the program included too few sessions. “The program is too short (week wise). I wish it was longer.”

In terms of FAST impact on family relationships, parents reported learning a great deal from other families, spending more time together as a family, communicating better with family members, and having a better relationship with the target child. “My child has been more interactive with the family and more attentive to details at home.” “FAST has made me very aware of the importance of family time.” Most parents felt they had a good relationship with their spouse/partner prior to attending FAST.

Although a few parents reported being better able to talk to their child’s teacher, most reported no relationship changes with school personnel. Many parents felt they had a good relationship with the school prior to participating in FAST. Parents also reported becoming more aware of the community resources available to them.

Parents shared that participation in FAST had helped them communicate better with their children, raised their awareness of the importance of family time, allowed them to open up and share with others, and made them more aware of community resources. The most valuable program experiences, in their views, were parent time, “special play,” meeting new parents and families, and spending quality time with family. “[FAST] makes me realize there are other parents in the same situation as me, and they are here to talk.”

Parent-observed changes in FAST target child included being eager to learn and participate in FAST, having better behavior at home and at school, and being more independent and outgoing. Others stated that their child was the “same great child.”

Discussion

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is a multifamily prevention program designed to empower parents to take advantage of community and school resources, communicate and interact with their children in positive ways, and build supportive relationships with other families in the same school or community. Despite the program emphasis on parent and child engagement, few of the numerous evaluations of FAST have collected and analyzed qualitative data reflecting the parent perspective (exception: Knox et al., 2011), and none have examined the child perspective. These are critical omissions given the evidence that the success of parenting programs rests largely on the degree to which the program and the implementation design takes into consideration participant perceptions and needs (Miller & Rollnick, 2002; Olds et al., 2007). The present study sought to fill a void in the research by collecting and analyzing

qualitative data from both child and parent participants of two community implementations of FAST.

The qualitative data collected in the form of child focus groups were overwhelmingly positive, and few differences between the target (“special play”) children and non-target children were observed. Children enjoyed most components of the program, including playing games (e.g., scribbles, feelings charades), being active outside or in a gym/multipurpose room, talking about feelings, and spending time with family. The children in both groups reported experiencing many benefits from participation in the program. They described being closer to their parents/family, knowing how to communicate more effectively, having more and better friends, and being able to handle conflict while avoiding aggression (i.e., fighting). Target children reported being happier, getting better grades (“being smarter”), and making better decisions since participating in FAST.

Target and non-target child perceptions of the “special play” time differed slightly. Target children enjoyed the special one-on-one time with a parent, with only one child not liking “special play” because she/he had to stop playing with an older sibling. Younger non-target children were more likely to react negatively to the “special play,” feeling that it was unfair that a sibling could play alone with a parent. However, older children, especially ones who had previously participated as the FAST target child in the past, felt that “special play” was fair and understood the importance of it for their younger sibling. The differences in child perceptions of “special play” can inform the manner in which children are prepared for this specific component of the program, as discussed in the Implications section below.

Consistent with the child qualitative data, the data collected as part of the FAST evaluation parent questionnaire provide support for parent engagement and buy-in of the FAST model. Parents enjoyed family time, the “special play,” and the time spent in discussion with other parents. They described improved relationships with family members, the FAST target child, and other community agencies/resources. Perceived benefits of participating in FAST included targeted program outcomes such as enhanced communication with children, increased quality family time, and improved child behavior both at home and at school.

An intriguing and important finding related to schools is the consensus that parent relationships with school personnel did not change as a result of participation in FAST. Although a representative of the school personnel at each community site was a member of each FAST team, except for recruiting and interviewing parents at the beginning of the program, that individual typically did not participate in the parent groups or engage with parents in any other

purposeful way. Instead, the school partner primarily carried out administrative duties such as collecting pre- and post-test surveys, sending weekly FAST reminders, helping with set-up/break-down, and assisting with Kids Time while parents participated in the Parent Group. The local FAST team members echoed this concern by stating that the school teachers are not directly integrated into the program in a way that would impact outcomes including parent–teacher relationships, parents’ school involvement, child classroom behavior, and child academic performance. Other FAST evaluations have also observed mixed results in terms of school involvement (Crozier et al., 2010).

Finally, the current authors argue that systematic investigation of child and parent perceptions and program feedback can and must be conducted in order to maximize the cultural fit and responsiveness of the program and to take advantage of the adaptable nature of school- and community-based programs such as FAST. Giving the child and parent participants a voice and responding to those voices as much as possible ensures the fit and sustainability of the program in a community. The qualitative methods used in this project can be easily replicated by evaluators of other school- and community-based parenting programs to inform developers of possible revisions to the program and to provide local facilitators with sources of potential adaptations of implementation.

Implications

Consistent with other program evaluation research (e.g., Stafstrom et al., 2012; Vessey, DiFazio, & Strout, 2016), the child focus groups in this study were effective at gaining insight into the perceptions of child participants in the FAST program. The child participants in this study went willingly with the evaluator to the classrooms where the focus groups were conducted, presumably because the environment (i.e., school) was familiar to them and the evaluator and focus group procedures were introduced by the FAST facilitators with whom they were comfortable. The children openly provided their views on different aspects of the program (e.g., “special play”), changes they would like to see made to the program and/or schedule, and perceived impact. Although most of the focus group feedback was positive, the children also shared “dislikes,” suggested changes, and expressed negative feelings toward the “special play” component, making it less likely that a social desirability bias contaminated the findings.

The child focus group questions and analytic strategy used in the present study can easily be used by communities implementing FAST or adapted for use with other community-based preventive interventions. Likewise, open-ended program feedback from parents can provide important information for meeting family needs and responding to any concerns that arise.

Although older children appeared to understand the importance of a younger sibling experiencing “special play” with a parent, younger children who have not had this experience could benefit from a discussion with a FAST team member and parent regarding this component of the program. Reassurance from FAST team members and the parent that the non-target child is important and loved will help to ease feelings of jealousy toward the target sibling. The FAST team can also encourage parents to engage in “special play” with the non-target child outside of the FAST program sessions.

The FAST program views the family and school as interrelated components of a larger system. The program is often held in a school building, yet school personnel (e.g., teachers, principals, guidance counselors) may not be actively involved in the program. Given the fact that parent involvement in schools has been linked to important outcomes such as student achievement (Gonzalez & Jackson, 2013; Ross, 2016), student engagement (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013), and improved parenting skills (Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stollmiller, 2008), program developers may want to consider ways in which school personnel can be more actively engaged with parents during the weekly sessions. These methods should reflect the culture of the families and schools but could include school open houses, parent–teacher lunch meetings, and opportunities to volunteer in the classroom. Adding a brainstorming session at the beginning of a program session for parents, teachers, and other school personnel may help generate ideas for enhancing the parent–school relationship and reaping the potential child, school climate, and family benefits.

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