



An Immigrant Community Takes Actions Against Drug Addiction

Drug and alcohol abuse program for high-risk preschool children

SUMMARY

The Head Start program in Fort George Community Enrichment Center in the Washington Heights section of New York City developed Project Right Start, a family and community-strengthening model that prepares parents to participate actively in community efforts to address substance abuse and related issues.

This was a project under the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF) national program, *Free to Grow: Head Start Partnerships to Promote Substance-Free Communities* (for more information see the [Program Results Report](#)).

Key Results

- Right Start overcame past antagonisms to develop a cooperative relationship with the New York City police departments 34th precinct Community Affairs Division. Over time, parents came to view the police as an important community resource and supported ongoing police efforts to foster neighborhood order and safety.
- Right Start's model of parent education, immigrant support and community action engaged a broad range of Head Start parents.
- An oral and cultural history program, led by consultants, celebrated the heritage of Dominican and Latino families by involving parents and children in special activities designed to increase their cultural knowledge and pride.
- Two weekly women's education and support groups explored parenting skills, disciplining children, family communication, health, domestic violence and other topics.
- An eight-session substance abuse prevention training program helped parents identify personal or family practices and environmental factors that place children at risk for or enhance their resistance to substance abuse.

- The grantee expanded two Community Issues Committees to engage a core group of 25 to 40 parents in a variety of substance abuse prevention projects. One committee focused on health and one on education.

Evaluation Findings

According to the *Free to Grow* program's evaluators from [Mathematica Policy Research](#):

- While Project Right Start is a promising model for substance abuse prevention, numerous challenges kept the project from being fully implemented or achieving long-term sustainability, including the project's failure to connect parents to civic leadership roles in the community.

Funding

RWJF provided two grants totaling \$575,337 from 1994 to 1999 to support the project.

THE PROBLEM

The Washington Heights community occupies one square mile in northern Manhattan and has a population of almost 200,000. By 1990, almost three-quarters of the residents spoke a language other than English in the home, primarily Spanish.

Immigrants from the Dominican Republic represent 43.5 percent of the population in Washington Heights, making them the single largest ethnic group. Many are first-generation Dominican immigrants with young children, and speak little English. They often experience feelings of loneliness and isolation due to the language barrier, which prevents full participation in community life, and to the distance that separates them from their family and culture of origin.

Feelings of alienation and stress, coupled with the poverty experienced by these families, are common among first-generation immigrant families in the United States, and are among the risk factors for substance abuse. An increasing number of youth turn not only to alcohol and drug use but to drug trafficking as well, which is disproportionately high in Washington Heights, partly because of the easy access to nearby wealthier communities.

Fort George Community Enrichment Center is a nonprofit organization created in 1981 for the purpose of establishing and operating education, health and social welfare programs. Through its two centers and 11 classrooms, it operates a Head Start agency providing education, health and nutrition services, a parent-involvement program and social services to 346 pre-school children and their families; 90 percent of them meet federal poverty guidelines. The majority of its clients receive public assistance.

THE PROJECT

Project Right Start, which operates in the Washington Heights community through the Fort George Community Enrichment Center's Head Start Program, began in 1992 as part of an RWJF-funded project of the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Foundation (see the [Program Results Report](#) on ID# 021128) and continued as a *Free to Grow* pilot program when that program was launched.

Project Right Start works specifically with immigrant families, primarily those of Dominican and Central and South American heritage. It seeks to increase their participation in, and connection to, the Washington Heights community, to enhance their understanding of substance abuse issues, to build leadership and to strengthen cultural awareness and pride through a variety of family- and community-strengthening strategies.

Right Start's family-strengthening activities included an oral and cultural history program; women's education and support groups; and substance abuse prevention training. Paid consultants, assisted by Fort George staff, developed and implemented the oral and cultural history program as well as the substance abuse prevention training. Community-strengthening activities were built around two Right Start Community Issues Committees, which evolved from two existing Head Start parent committees.

The expanded Right Start committees brought parents together to develop and implement prevention-focused community action projects. In addition, Right Start encouraged parents with leadership potential to remain active in their community after their children left Head Start by participating in the many community coalitions and citizens groups in Washington Heights.

To support this process, Fort George, on the recommendation of the *Free to Grow* national program office, formed a Community Empowerment Network to bring together community partners and parents from the various Right Start components. Staff also planned to establish a Men's Education and Support Group to engage fathers in project activities.

Right Start staff consisted of a director and deputy director, who were assisted by two Head Start education coordinators, two Head Start family services coordinators and six social service workers. Various paid consultant partners also played a lead role in implementing portions of the project.

The Partners

Right Start helped to solidify existing collaborations and build linkages with new partners, including the police and community-based coalitions. While Right Start coordinated with numerous other organizations in the Washington Heights area during

the pilot period, funding and staff shortages prevented many from being involved for more than a short time.

Key collaborators at the close of the project included the Children's Aid Society, District Attorney's Office, Literacy Assistance Center, and Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights. While these collaborators provided important services and support to particular Right Start project components, they were generally not engaged in strategic planning for the project or in facilitating parents' ongoing civic involvement and activism.

RESULTS

- **Right Start overcame past antagonisms to develop a cooperative relationship with the 34th precinct's Community Affairs Division.** This accomplishment was noted by researchers from Mathematica Policy Research, which had been commissioned by RWJF to evaluate the *Free to Grow* program and examine several of the projects in detail (see the [Program Results Report](#)). Over time, parents came to view the police as an important community resource and supported ongoing police efforts to foster neighborhood order and safety.
- **Right Start's model of parent education, immigrant support and community action engaged a broad range of Head Start parents.** During the pilot phase, more than one-third of Head Start parents participated in at least one Right Start activity. Most parents who participated in regular Head Start classroom committees also participated in Right Start.
- **An oral and cultural history program, led by consultants, celebrated the heritage of Dominican and Latino families by involving parents and children in special activities designed to increase their cultural knowledge and pride.** Fifteen to thirty parents participated in the program, which was designed to help reduce parents' feelings of isolation and improve their self-esteem. Workshop components included immigration and acculturation, family traditions and folk tales, heroes/heroines, mask making and nutrition and healthy ethnic cooking. Parents also discussed how stresses related to immigration and the process of acculturation may place them at higher risk for substance abuse.
- **Two weekly women's education and support groups explored parenting skills, disciplining children, family communication, health, domestic violence and other topics.** The fifteen to thirty women who participated in these groups each year credited them with improving their family management, parenting and family communication skills.
- **An eight-session substance abuse prevention training program helped parents identify personal or family practices and environmental factors that place children at risk for or enhance their resistance to substance abuse.** Sixty to ninety parents annually participated in the training, which was led by consultants. By the end

of the project, the consultants had trained agency social service workers to lead the sessions themselves.

- **The grantee expanded two Community Issues Committees, one focused on health and one on education, to engage a core group of 25 to 40 parents in a variety of substance abuse prevention projects.** Parents in the Education Committee successfully lobbied the police to expand community policing around Head Start centers and advocated for extending Drug-Free School Zone coverage to preschools. Through collaborations with partners, they also sponsored a citizenship drive and promoted access to legal consultations and literacy assistance.

The Health Committee focused on educating residents about substance abuse prevention and reducing the availability of alcohol and other drugs to minors. They videotaped storefronts and billboards for a series of public access television segments; surveyed local store owners to assess compliance with alcohol and tobacco advertising regulations with respect to minors; and lobbied police for better enforcement of laws restricting alcohol and tobacco sales to minors.

By the end of the pilot period, the primary focus of the committees had shifted from community action to sponsoring educational workshops and training sessions on neighborhood safety, mental health and other topics designed to bring parents together and connect them with resources.

- **Although 40 parents received leadership skills training, they did not assume roles as active leaders of project activities as originally planned.** A select group of parents who had participated in other project components, such as the substance abuse training, and who were interested in serving as parent leaders, received additional training in conflict resolution, working with groups and problem solving.

The training was designed to prepare them to assist with substance abuse prevention training, lead educational workshops for other parents and recruit new parents to Right Start. Although some parents helped in these areas, their involvement with the project was relatively limited, and usually ended once their children left Head Start.

- **The Community Empowerment Network never fully materialized.** The network was intended to be a mechanism to engage partners and collaborators in Right Start planning and community action efforts and to move parents into civic involvement and leadership activities beyond Head Start. The difficulty of establishing the network reflected the ongoing problems Fort George experienced in developing and sustaining a stable set of nonconsultant partners.
- **The Men's Education and Support Group was never fully implemented.** Midway through the pilot, a small group of five or six fathers met several times, typically to socialize in a group setting with their children. However, Ft. George experienced ongoing difficulties engaging fathers and sustaining the group.

Evaluation Findings

After discussing *Free to Grow's* impact with project staff, partners and a small group of participating families, evaluators from Mathematica Policy Research reported that the program was perceived as having a large influence in strengthening parents and, in turn, families. Staff and parents also felt that the family-strengthening activities provided parents with valuable information and regular opportunities to interact in a supportive and positive social environment with a cohesive group of their peers. In addition, Right Start was viewed as playing an important role in encouraging the parents to play an active role in the community.

However, the evaluators found that while Project Right Start was a promising model for substance abuse prevention, numerous challenges kept the project from being fully implemented or achieving long-term sustainability, including the project's failure to connect parents to civic leadership roles in the community.

Communications

Dissemination was not a focus of this project, although staff presented information on Right Start at national and state Head Start conferences as well as at local health fairs. (No Bibliography is provided.)

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **A systematic process should be established to help connect parents to civic leadership roles in the community.** Right Start's vision of engaging parents in sustained community action was hindered by the lack of a fully functioning Community Empowerment Network. To connect parents with civic leadership and activist roles with other organizations, projects should develop strong community partnerships. (Evaluator/Mathematica Policy Research)
2. **To ensure long term sustainability of *Free to Grow*, agencies should develop the capacity of their own staff to lead project activities rather than relying extensively on paid consultants.** The grantee relied heavily on paid consultants to develop the oral and cultural history program and substance abuse prevention training. While consultants were able to train social workers to carry on the substance abuse prevention training to some extent, the skills and knowledge required to lead the Oral and Cultural History component, were not transferable. (Evaluator/Mathematica Policy Research)

AFTERWARD

The Fort George Community Enrichment Center's Head Start management team assumed responsibility for integrating and sustaining portions of the project over the long term. During the transition, Head Start staff refocused the efforts of the Education and

Community Issues group towards immigration, implementing citizenship counseling and offering voter education sessions.

The Health and Community Issues group continued to work to reduce the prevalence and abuse of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs in the community by advocating for stricter drug control laws, as well as offering leadership training sessions for interested residents. With a grant from the Merck Foundation, the group expanded its focus to include helping families with obesity, diabetes and asthma by offering nutritional health services and hiring an asthma counselor.

Drawing from the experience with *Free to Grow's* Women's Support Group, Head Start staff developed a Men's Support Group, an initiative designed to educate men and offer counseling related to the issues of work and fatherhood. In 2008, some 20 men actively participated in the sessions, which met monthly and were hosted by a resident psychologist.

Prepared by: Jayme Hannay

Reviewed by: Karyn Feiden, Robert Crum and McKaughan

Program Officers: Marjorie Gutman (Pilot Phase), Karen Gerlach (National Demonstration Phase), and C. Tracy Orleans (Evaluation)

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APPENDIX 1

A Case Study

As Project Right Start's work continues, it hopes to be able to reach more and more women like Elena, a first generation immigrant from the Dominican Republic who settled in Washington Heights with her young children. Elena spoke no English, could not find a job and needed a translator to make an appointment. Elena is a Project Right Start success story. As a committee participant she was involved in the leadership development training and completed a series of ESL classes. She was subsequently able to find a job cleaning businesses and homes within the community, and can now support her family. In addition, Elena's English has significantly improved. The last time she took her children to the doctor she was able to speak with both the office staff and the physician without a translator. Elena's children have seen their mother's self-esteem and life skills grow, and it is testimony to them that with hard work and effort success in a new culture is possible.

APPENDIX 2

Community Voices

"Right Start has helped Head Start reach parents on a different level. It has helped parents focus on the drawbacks of substance use and abuse and has given them a language to use to talk to their children about substance abuse issues. It has helped them focus more attention on themselves and on what they can accomplish—it has helped to empower parents."

—Head Start/Right Start Staff

"I participated in a lot of workshops while my child was in Head Start and benefited from them a lot. Since my child left Head Start, I have become much more involved in the community. Now, I'm the secretary for the PTA at my child's school, I belong to the tenants' association for my building. I have even gone to the school district to voice parents' concerns about our children's education. I'm much more active in the community."

—Right Start Parent