

STRIVE: An Open Source Parenting Program

Increasing access to research-based programs for vulnerable families

Goal

Partners for Our Children (POC), in collaboration with the Washington DSHS Children's Administration (CA), is in the process of developing STRIVE, an evidence-informed, open source parenting program that promotes child safety, positive family functioning and timely reunification. Our goal is to make high quality parent training available to a larger number of families who are involved with the child welfare system so more children can remain at home or be safely reunited with their parents – thereby, improving overall child well-being.

Summary

There is a growing body of literature on parenting programs, particularly for parents and caregivers of children who have (or are at risk for having) behavioral problems. Surprisingly, however, there are relatively few parenting programs designed to meet the needs of those who need them the most – families involved with the child welfare system. Poverty, mental health problems, substance abuse, and the involuntary nature of child welfare involvement make it challenging to engage these parents in a program, which makes it even more difficult to teach the positive parenting techniques they need in order to keep or bring their families together.

Any one of these challenges is difficult for a family to face, but many of these families face multiple – so even the most notable evidence-based parenting programs may not hit the mark with these families. Further, the high cost of many programs – including expenses for program licenses, materials, staff training, certification, and ongoing consultation – significantly reduces their availability since child welfare systems continue to struggle financially. Given this situation, the development of an affordable, customizable parenting program that is tailored to meet the unique needs of child welfare-involved families could benefit the child welfare system tremendously – that's why POC is developing STRIVE.

To encourage experimentation, STRIVE will be an "open source" program, meaning that the program will be affordable, available online, and the materials will be open for editing and modifications. It is important to note that POC will maintain an original version of the program. If this version is found to be effective after a formal evaluation, it is possible that modifications may not deliver the same results.

However, we understand that unique family situations may require program modifications, so users will be asked to share changes or findings online, including updated materials and documented outcomes for children and families (e.g., rate of reunification after the program was completed). This feedback loop will ensure that the program will become stronger with insights from users.

The Challenge

Child welfare caseworkers try to keep families together whenever possible. When it is necessary to remove children from their homes, Children's Administration develops a plan to reunite them with their parents as quickly as possible. Among other things, these plans often require successful completion of a parenting program. These programs aim to enhance parenting skills, such as developing positive discipline techniques and learning how to develop strong, healthy parent-child relationships. Currently, a wide variety of such programs are delivered to families. By and large, these programs were not designed with the needs of child welfare families in mind. Further, very few have been rigorously evaluated to understand the child and family outcomes for child welfare populations. Yet, the state must spend several million dollars on these programs and still only reach a small portion of the families who could benefit from them.

A Solution

Developing STRIVE, a parenting program that is affordable and readily available online, could dramatically increase the number of child welfare-involved families receiving evidence-informed programs that are tailored to meet their unique needs. While it is difficult to quantify the exact cost savings to the state, it is reasonable to assume that providing this

program to a larger number families involved with the child welfare system will also reduce the need for more expensive “downstream” interventions, such as longer stays in out-of-home care, more court involvement, etc.

Other advantages of STRIVE include:

1. **Meet law requirements:** STRIVE will allow the public child welfare agency to more easily comply with three statutory requirements in Washington state: [HB 2264](#) (performance-based contracting), [HB 2536](#) (evidence-based programs) and [SB 6555](#) (Family Assessment Response). Each of these policies rely on the spread of evidence-based programs in order to effectively improve outcomes for families.
2. **Spread beyond Washington State:** Because STRIVE will be affordable and available online, it will be accessible to anyone looking for an evidence-informed parenting program regardless of geographic location.
3. **Continuously improve:** STRIVE will continuously evolve based upon on feedback from the families who receive services and the practitioners who deliver these services, which would strengthen the program over time.
4. **Match investment dollars:** Since POC is based at the University of Washington, we can access federal matching funds available to state-based entities that work on specific child welfare issues, such as curriculum development and practitioner training.

The program curriculum is nearly complete, so POC will pursue funding for a study to assess the effectiveness of the first two tailored programs with families involved with the child welfare system (i.e., randomized controlled trial). A rigorous evaluation helps improve program outcomes and lays the groundwork to receive the “stamp of approval” as an evidence-based program.

Program Overview

STRIVE will support the parenting needs of many families – those receiving home-based services, families with children in out-of-home care who may reunify, and families with children who are transitioning back into the home. As such, it will comprise of a suite of programs, each designed for a specific set of circumstances faced by child welfare-involved families. Some programs may also be applicable for families that may not be involved in the child welfare system, but struggle with many of the same issues. STRIVE will:

- Be designed for delivery by a wide variety of practitioners, including suitable lay persons;

- Focus on parent engagement by using a strengths-based approach (highlighting positives) to increase parental participation;
- Include strategies for supporting parents and children who have experienced trauma;
- Provide “core” sessions pertinent to all families, and a menu of other sessions that may be selected by the trainer/coach or social worker in collaboration with the parent; and
- Include accompanying software tools that enable the collection of data on program participation and outcomes.

The current programs we are developing focuses on families with children between the ages of 0 and 8 years old who have been placed in out-of-home care. The primary goals of the initial programs are to strengthen parenting skills and enhance relationships, which we believe will ultimately promote timely reunification of families. Eventually, we will modify these programs for use with other families within the child welfare system who may not have children in out-of-home care, but need other support services. POC is currently developing the following:

- **Visitation Program.** This program is designed for delivery to an individual parent or caregiver within the context of supervised visitation with their child. It stresses the importance of engagement, educates the parent on the purpose of visitations, and focuses on parent skill training that helps build the parent-child relationship, such as how to respond to child cues, developmentally appropriate parent to child communication, etc.
- **Parenting Class Program.** This program is designed for delivery to a group of parents who all have children in out-of-home care. These group-based classes can also be one-on-one sessions if needed. Overall, they focus on how to build skills and knowledge on nurturing yourself, the parent-child relationship, and relationships with other adults – covering everything from emotion regulation to effective problem solving.

Information

More information on child welfare in Washington State can be found on our website, www.partnersforourchildren.org.

Please send your questions to:
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