

Exploring the Changing Dynamics of the Relationship of Mothers and Adolescents through Intervention Program *Family and School Together* (FAST)

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ABSTRACT: Family and School Together (FAST) is a well-known intervention program in the United States, implemented in over 20 countries and 48 countries including the United States, England, Austria, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands. The FAST program is implemented using a module that emphasizes activities that improve relationships between participants. This study explores the FAST program implemented in a secondary school in Bangi Selangor and focuses on the dynamic changes of mother-son relationships with 16-year-old boys. This study used a qualitative approach with purposive sampling techniques and analysed using NVivo 10 software to explore changes in mother-child relationships after eight weeks of participating in the FAST program. Studies have found that FAST has the potential to be an intervention program that can help improve the relationship between mother and child. For future suggestions, FAST should widely be used in schools as an intervention program involving the cooperation of schools, parents and communities.

KEYWORDS: FAST, Teenagers, parents, parent-child relationships, dynamic change.

I. INTRODUCTION

The FAST program has been implemented in over 20 countries and 48 states including the United States, England, Austria, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands. The FAST program has also been successfully implemented in over 800 schools as a preliminary prevention and intervention program for at-risk adolescents [1]. The target of the FAST program is children and adolescents at risk of falling out of education due to a variety of social problems including poverty, dysfunctional family systems, and parental substance abuse [2].

The program was further streamlined through the involvement of the Wisconsin Centre for Education Research, University of Wisconsin United States through the Building Relationships project in collaboration with the United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance [3]. Lynn McDonald, also a social worker and professor, targets children with disabilities because she believes that children with disabilities often come from troubled families [4].

The FAST program in this study involved adolescents (14 years-18 years) namely Teen FAST. The Teen FAST program was conducted for eight weeks under the FAST model in collaboration with various parties. The FAST specific criteria is the involvement of all members to reduce the chances of academic failure among children where families (mothers, fathers, siblings) will participate in assigned tasks and this group is led or trained by a multi-professional team of teachers, social workers, parent associations representing the family systems, schools and communities involved representing microsystem, mesosystem and ecosystem [5].

II. RELATED WORK

This study will focus on the FAST Teen module. The selection of FAST adolescent intervention programs to be run in Malaysia is in line with the current development of school-age adolescent misconducts [6]. The selection of adolescent participants was conducted in collaboration with school counsellors based on issues of disciplinary misconducts, recorded substance abuse, school dropout issues or pupils who had received guidance and counselling (issues of lack of confidence, depression and others). All shortlisted participants will receive a FAST team visit home to get their mother to join the program with family members.

The selected participants will be with the family to carry out the planned activities for two and a half hours each week. The program will run for up to eight weeks and each weekly session will feature seven main activities, i.e. i. Family Unit and Family Table, ii. Time with peers (Peer Group Time), iii. Mother-and-son face-to-face time (One-to-One Time); v. Lucky basket draw (Game and Lotto) v. Closure (Closing circle). Schools play a role in connecting family function where the school is an agency for children's social innovation. Through school children will learn how to live in within the society. [4]

There are three popular intervention programs that target the relationship between school and community. Strengthening Families program (SPF 10-14), Social Skills Group Intervention Adolescent (SSGRIN A) and Thurston Family Project (TFP). The SFP10-14 and SSGRIN A, programs are adapted from evident-based intervention programs in the United States while The Thurston Family Project is being developed in the United Kingdom. All of these programs are youth-based programs except for the Thurston Family Project which is based on families and teens [7]. However, out of these four programs, FAST is reported to undergo consistent and continuous training and has proven consistent research achievements to improve the family function. The FAST study has been proven by the findings of a study representing the various countries previously reported. The study participants were also selected from mothers and adolescents from divorced families as children of divorced parents were exposed to high risk of poor academic achievement, problematic social relationships, difficult psychological adjustment and behavioural problems. [8].

The Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1986)

The theory of Bronfenbrenner ecology forms the basis of this study. Bronfenbrenner in his study of the impact of the FAST program on the dynamic relationship of mother and child. Bronfenbrenner emphasized the influence of ecology on the development of adolescent personality. The environment of microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem are interrelated in life [9]. Microsystem, ecosystems, and macrosystem are the most influential factors in shaping the physical and mental characteristics of adolescents. In the microsystem there is direct interaction with social agents such as mothers, siblings, peers and teachers where adolescents are not just passive recipients but also shape and develop microsystem settings. Adolescents gain experience in each activity and also play a role in developing interpersonal relationships with their microsystem [10]. In this study, the FAST program became a microsystem environment that brought together mothers, siblings, teachers and community representatives. All individuals in this environment are very important in the development of adolescent personality, especially mothers and siblings. Each subsystem in the microsystem interacts with each other and has influenced the dynamic changes of the mother-adolescent relationship.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative methods of case study by aiming using purposive sampling method. Case study is a method of research carried out on a unified system, whether it is a program or an event that is bound by a particular place, time or bond [11]. The selection of qualitative method design was chosen for several reasons, firstly the FAST program is a complex program and to understand it is a complex process that requires qualitative studies that can provide a clear and comprehensive explanation [12]. The design chosen for this study is suitable for researchers exploring and deepening the FAST program. It helps researchers to better understand FAST activities that influence changes in mother and child behaviour. Three (3) mother participants and three (3) adolescent participants will be the subject of the study. The researcher will conduct in-depth interviews and data is then triangulated using observation and analysis of documents administered through *NVivo 10*.



IV. RESULTS

Background of informants.

The informants consisted of three (3) mother participants and three (3) adolescent participants in the FAST program. All three mother informants are single mothers. One is a factory worker while the other two are small-business vendors that worked from home. Teen informants are male adolescents referred to counsellors for misconduct and disciplinary violations at school. The selection of 6 informants was sufficient because the researcher had reached the point of saturation for all the informants. All participants are Malays and youth participants are still in school in form 4. All of the study participants live in council home reserved for tenants of single mothers and under the supervision of the Persatuan Ibu Tunggal Rangkaian Hati (PITRAH). Two single mothers in their 50's are widowers while one single mother in their 30s has officially divorced for more than 3 years.

The findings show that the FAST Program has impacted the mother-child dynamic relationship through the activities undertaken. The FAST program through its activities has increased communication among mothers and adolescent participants. There are three main activities that participants need to go through each week. The FAST activities being explored are family table activities, time with peers and one to one activity.

Family table activities

Family table activities give teens a chance to be with their mothers and siblings enjoying dinner together and doing their assigned tasks. Participants will go through this activity for 45 minutes each week. Throughout this activity participants will discuss and look for a word of agreement to make the activity successful. The teenager will be the leader of their own family group and will speak on behalf of the family.

Activity with peers (peer time) & Buddy time

The next activity is peer time. Through this activity participants will be divided into three groups: teen with teen, mother with mother (buddy time) and other siblings in one group. Through time with peers, participants will discuss with other FAST members. Teenagers will focus on the things that are related to them and the mother participants will focus on the things that are relevant to their teenagers. The participants spent thirty minutes (30) in each group.

One to one activity

The one to one activity is a highlight for mom and teenagers. Mothers and teenagers will spend 20 minutes together. Teenagers will talk about the topic they have chosen while being with their peers. Meanwhile the mother needs to hear the teen's ideas before giving feedbacks. Mothers and teens are not allowed to talk abusively or use profane language in discussions. If the mother disagrees with what is being proposed, she should state the reason why the proposal was rejected. Whereas the mother agrees to the proposal, the teen should promise to appreciate the opportunity. The activities outlined in the FAST module are activities that emphasize aspects of communication, behaviours and family aspects. On average, participants showed dynamic changes after participating in FAST activities.

There are two main themes that are derived from the fact that FAST activities have improved communication and behaviours patterns. Themes and Sub themes are as follows;

| Theme | Sub theme |
|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Communication | communication skills |
| | The importance of communication |
| Behaviour | Positive behaviour |
| | Controlling emotions |

Communication

Communication is the foundation of relationships that involve more than one person. To ensure effective communication, the speaker must ensure that the communication carried out is two-way. Through FAST activities mothers and adolescents need to properly and precisely communicate. Thus, the program emphasizes communication skills such as communication patterns, use of tone of voice, speaking style of language and understanding the

importance of communication which is the importance of delivering and receiving information to individuals. The findings of this study showed that mothers and adolescents have altered communication patterns that were initially more of an orientation of objectivity to conversation orientation. Objectivity-based communication is synonymous with the Asian community culture used to discipline children. Even in Islam itself emphasizing a pattern of appropriateness in which children cannot raise a voice to their parents even by simply saying the word "ah" [13]. This is stated by the informant as follows;

"If my mom is angry, I will just be quiet, I don't want to argue... but there is a time that I will answer back too... if I answer back, I will definitely fight with her" (Teen informant 1)

FAST teenage mothers use the veto power when determining children actions either right or wrong.

"...there's no chance for us to talk, if we say it right mom will tell us wrong ... so I'll just keep quiet" (Teen informant 2)

This causes children to become easily depressed and unwilling to cooperate in developing healthy relationships. This is stated as follows.

"... hard to say, when my mom starts nagging...Whatever we say she doesn't want to hear" (Teen informant 3)

Through the FAST program, participants were exposed to discussions as a problem-solving strategy. During the discussion, participants should ensure that communication patterns and communication skills were used correctly. Participants were encouraged to use appropriate tones of voice, demonstrate communication skills and understand the importance of communication in successful relationships. The changes were described by the teens as follows;

"... we have a lot of activities to do together ... so enjoy talking to mom right now because she listens of what I had to say..." (Teen informant 1)

FAST emphasizes two-way communication. FAST encourages children and mothers to talk and reach consensus in every discussion

"... whatever it is now, I would ask his (teenager's) opinion first, even at home we talk a lot about what's going on" (Mother's Informant1)

Through effective communication participants understand the importance of communication to ensure the success of the relationship. This is explained as follows;

"...does not give teens a chance to speak on their behalf. Over time teenagers no longer want to talk to us... eventually...the distance and they will choose to talk with peers..." (Mother's Informant 2)

This is supported by the following statements;

"... when I pay attention to what he (the teenager) wants to tell me, I see his spirit changes ... more diligent, more sensible ... we are closer than ever before." (Mother's informant 3)

Behaviours

FAST activities also improve the behaviour of participants. The findings of the FAST adolescent study show that the change in negative behaviour towards behaviour is better than before. Through empowerment of communication, mothers and teenagers become closer. Reprimand given by the mother can be accepted by adolescents. This is stated in the following interviews

"After the third (3) week's activity, it can be stopped if he does something wrong. I'm very happy that he is now can be advised. Previously, if he was prohibited from going out, he would get angry and still went out too." (Mother's Informant2)

Adolescents also appreciate the decisions and opinions of others, including peers.

"... he no longer mocks his other friends. A lot has changed, he speaks politely ... does not get angry nowadays...no more hot-tempered, insults, if not even he will get into fights with the siblings..."
(Mother's informant 3)

Changes in behaviour is not only at home but also practiced at school. This is stated as follows;

"... the teacher sent me a message telling me that he changed a lot in school... respect the teachers and friends... very different after joining the FAST program ..." (Informant IBU 1)

"I did not hear any more complaints if teen is involved in disciplinary or behavioural problems after following FAST..." (Informant MOTHER 2)

"...(teenager) spend more time at home after school," (Mother's Informant 3)

Through observation, researcher observed mother-teenager relationship pattern improve weekly. Teenagers became more comfortable conversing with their mothers and did activities together. Teenagers also showed changes in behaviour towards positive when facing with much older people.

V. CONCLUSION

The study has found that the FAST program improved the empowerment of communication between mother and child and reduced the negative behaviours of children both at home or at school. Through activities such as time with family, time with peers and time with mom and teen, participants were encouraged to use effective communication to achieve program goals. Failed communication is caused by parents not spending time with their children. Parents who are busy at work can cause the relationship between children and their parents to be apart. This is due to the time spent by parents to children is limited and restricted. [15]

FAST is an intervention program involving families and very suitable to be implemented to overcome discipline problems in school. This study shows FAST as a successful program to improve the quality of parenting behaviour which refer to the support given by the mother of the child in the aspect of caring towards the child's feelings, interested in daily activities, expressing the feelings of love and acceptance, encouraging appropriate behaviours, help solving problems, and strengthening children's achievement.

FAST is an intervention program that can increase the level of awareness among parents and teens about the importance of the concept of family and behaving positively. Training and sharing of parenting skills, application of good values and spirituality, problem solving skills and effective communication techniques are programs that can be implemented to provide understanding to those involved [16]. Thus, FAST is strongly suggested as an early intervention program to overcome the problems of discipline in schools in Malaysia.

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