HOT TOPICS

Can School-Based Programs Help Children Cope with Violence?

Children today are increasingly exposed to violence, whether by witnessing violent acts or by being victims themselves. Without programs to help them now, these children are far more likely to suffer from emotional and behavioral problems that may follow them into adulthood. Various obstacles prevent families from taking advantage of current programs, but a school-based approach works for many.

The first randomized control study of such a program by health researchers from RAND, the Los Angeles Unified School District, and UCLA finds that a ten-group session school-based mental health program—known as the Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS)—has positive results for students exposed to violence. In particular, students who completed the program had significantly fewer symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression. In addition, parents reported that their children were functioning much better, and children and parents reported seeing the same level of improvement several months after the program ended.

Working with sixth-grade students from a socioeconomically disadvantaged area of Los Angeles and using such methods as talking, drawing, and writing, CBITS helped students learn how to cope with their prior exposure to violence and provided training to help them deal in the future with stressful or anxious situations, negative thoughts, and other real-life problems. CBITS was well received by the parents, students, and school personnel who participated, and other school districts have expressed an interest in adopting and implementing the program.

Retention Problems in Treatment Programs for Adolescent Probationers

Residential rehabilitation and substance abuse treatment programs offer an alternative to imprisonment for many adolescents in the juvenile justice system. Prior studies indicate that adolescents who complete a full treatment program benefit more in the long run than participants who leave the program prematurely. A low retention rate in many residential programs, however, is a significant problem. Reasons for low program retention are discussed in a RAND Drug Policy Research Center study. Researchers studied adolescents who were placed in residential rehabilitation programs by the Juvenile Court System in Los Angeles. The study finds that treatment motivation, severity of substance abuse, and peer environment are particularly influential pretreatment characteristics. During treatment, a safe environment is a primary concern of participants and has a significant impact on retention. Also influential is the availability of other services at the treatment site, such as counseling for physical or sexual abuse, job training, assistance with family problems, and alcohol counseling.

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How Does California Use Its Additional TANF Funds?

Under federal welfare reform legislation, states have increased flexibility in how they can use Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds. California allocates its TANF funds between social services, through the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program, and probation, through the Comprehensive Youth Services Act (CYS/TANF). A new RAND study evaluates the CYSA/TANF program and finds that, although counties took different approaches to implementing CYSA/TANF, they all have operated within the scope of the legislation’s intent. Overall, counties used CYSA/TANF to fund programs in custody settings (that is, such institutions as juvenile hall and/or ranches and camps) or spread their CYSA/TANF allocation across the continuum of options to fund programs in multiple categories (from prevention and early intervention to supervision to custody). The 23 services eligible for CYSA/TANF funding were provided in the context of a number of different programs, ranging from contracting with mental health service specialists to providing counseling to at-risk youths or to youths in the institutions to establishing multiagency centers where wrap-around services could be provided to youths and their families.

FORTHCOMING REPORT

Challenges Facing the American Middle School

Middle schools are often forgotten in the major policy debates. RAND researchers examined the challenges facing American middle schools. Among the team’s recommendations: test alternatives to the 6–8 grade configuration to reduce multiple transitions for students and allow schools to better align goals across K–12; ensure that all students enter middle schools ready to learn by providing special programs for lowest achieving youth; adopt comprehensive disciplinary models that focus on preventing disciplinary problems and changing the peer culture; and provide teachers with professional development to compensate for their lack of training.

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