

The Impact of Family Peer Support for Justice Involved Families



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Parent/Professional Advocacy League (PPAL) is the leading public voice for families whose children have emotional, behavioral and mental health needs in Massachusetts. PPAL is dedicated to promoting change that will improve the systems that serve children and their families statewide.



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Executive Summary

While family peer support has been studied as a component of wraparound or as a service offered to families involved in the child welfare or mental health systems, little is known of its impact on families whose children are justice involved. Research shows that family peer support increases self-efficacy, boosts knowledge of services and increases skills for families who receive it. Parent/Professional Advocacy League (PPAL) has been providing family peer support to justice involved families for more than five years in Massachusetts and is in a unique position to survey families to determine the impact. As a family-run organization with more than 15 years of conducting family-driven research, PPAL has a successful history of engaging families, including in its studies.

In late spring and summer of 2018, PPAL contacted 151 families to encourage their participation in two sequential rounds of structured phone surveys. All parents who participated had a child who was or had been justice involved and also had received family peer support in the previous 12 months. 30 families completed the first survey after 517 contacts or an average of 2.3 contacts/parent. All 30 families agreed to be contacted for the second round of phone interviews and 21 completed the follow up survey, after more than 90 contacts by phone and text message. Interviews were conducted by PPAL staff not directly involved in the juvenile justice project.

Disparities in access to special education

The majority of respondents (73%) said their child had received special education services in past 24 months. When analyzed by race/ethnicity of the child, 88% of Caucasian youth had received special education services as well as 80% of Hispanic youth. In contrast, only 63% of African American youth had an IEP or 504 plan. 4% reported that they had tried to access special education for their child but had not been successful; all of these respondents had African American children.

Overall, 43% reported that their child had been suspended and 13% said their child had been expelled from school in the last 24 months. When analyzed by race/ethnicity, twice as many (25%) African American youth had been expelled than Caucasian youth (13%) and no Hispanic youth had been expelled. In addition, 50% of African American youth had been suspended while only 38% of Caucasian youth and 36% of Hispanic youth had. African American youth (13%) were most likely to be sent home from school with instructions that they required an evaluation of their “dangerousness” before they could return. Again, there were significant differences by race/ethnicity in each category.

Disparities in Law Enforcement Encounters

Nearly all respondents (78%) reported that their child had been arrested in the previous 24 months and 17% had received a warning. While 50% of Caucasian youth had received a warning as well as 11% of Hispanic youth, no parents of African American youth reported they had received a warning. All, however, reported that their child had been arrested. Another 17% said the school resource officer (SRO) had arrested their child; the percent of African American students arrested by an SRO was nearly double (29%) that overall number. Although 43% stated that they had called the police themselves because of an issue with their child, the majority of these parents were Caucasian or Hispanic; only 14% of African American parents made a call to the police. 22% also said that they had called the mobile crisis team but that the team said they were unable to respond. The mobile crisis team either then called the police themselves or told the parent to do so. One parent commented, "I guess youth mobile crisis needs more funding."

Disparities in Court Experiences

All of the families reported that their child had been to court in the previous 24 months. The majority (46%) went to court for a hearing and 36% reported their child went to court because a Child Requiring Assistance petition (CRA) had been filed. 11% stated the reason their child had to appear in court was because of truancy; nearly all of those youth were African American. Only 25% reported that their child was diverted to other services; twice as many white youth were diverted as African American youth.

Key Findings

Families had received one to one support customized to their individual needs and included common elements including system navigation, help locating community resources, coordination with other services, education and information, advocacy in accessing care and benefits, building skills, access to training and connections to other parents with similar challenges. Significant improvements were identified after receiving this service.

- Parents reported the most significant impact was in their ability to persist and keep going until they found what they needed. 70% of parents who received family peer support reported that their ability to persist and keep going till they found what they needed had increased.
- After receiving family peer support, 65% of parents said their ability to describe clearly what works or not for their family had increased.

- After receiving family peer support, 62% of parents said their ability to find resources their child and family needed, even when it seemed nothing was out there, had increased.
- More than half of the respondents (57%) reported that their ability to be calm and strong even when the school or court questioned them or disagreed with them had increased.

Families were also asked to rate, based on their personal experiences, what most helps families increase their knowledge of the juvenile justice and their ability to successfully navigate it. The range of options included family support specialists, online resources, friend, family and workshops.

- 52% of parents said talking to a knowledgeable family support specialist increased their knowledge of juvenile justice system
- 71% of families reported that a knowledgeable family support specialist also increased their ability to find resources
- 62% said a knowledgeable family support specialist increased their ability to communicate and ask for what their child and family needed
- 52% said talking to a family support specialist had helped them become a better advocate for their child

Conclusions

Family peer support is an effective service for families whose children are justice involved. Most notably, their ability to persist and keep going, even when they feel overwhelmed and unprepared to help their child was greatly increased. Family peer support also improved the ability of parents to articulate what works and what doesn't as well as being more effective in finding resources. It builds skills and self-efficacy and can also have a secondary, positive impact on their children.

Inequity in the experience of families of color, especially African American families, was apparent. This included disciplinary action at school, rates of arrest by school resource officers and rates of diversion. There was also marked inequity in access to special education services and the protections that accompany it.

Increased parent skills, knowledge and teaching them that they add value when they participate is a direct result of family peer support. Although the focus of this study was on the impact of family peer support for parents, it is notable that the majority reported that their child was not suspended, expelled or removed from school after working with the family support specialist, a secondary impact.

Background

When many families reach the juvenile justice system, they are in crisis. If families are unfamiliar with what to expect and are not provided essential information about the process, the likelihood of their cooperating and participating in the process, and effectively advocating for their child, is low. At the same time, juvenile justice system staff often don't understand the perspective of the family, and may lack the skills to effectively engage families as partners (Skowrya & Coccozza, 2007). In addition, the adversarial nature of the juvenile justice system often intimidates families, especially if they are unfamiliar with the system and anxious about the future of their child (Osher & Hunt, 2002).

As a result, families whose youth are involved in juvenile justice are often viewed as uninterested, inept or disengaged. Families report that they lack knowledge, don't know where to turn and feel overwhelmed and disregarded. They lack basic knowledge of the court process, how to understand the role of law enforcement or the probation system. They struggle to identify and locate needed resources and are unsure of how they can be effective when trying to help their child. They often feel alone and uncertain and don't know who will offer effective assistance. Everyone, it seems, has a defined role but them. To facilitate their involvement, families need information, training, and support at all stages of their child's experience with the juvenile justice system (Osher & Hunt, 2002). In one study, 86% of families expressed interest in being more involved in their children's treatment while youth were incarcerated (Justice for Families, 2012), yet many are uncertain of their role.

One strategy that can provide a substantial positive impact is family peer support. Key elements of family peer support include advocacy, education, training, and peer-to-peer support, usually offered by another parent with lived experience in caring for a child with behavioral health needs (Center for Health Care Strategies, 2013). This support is most effective when the family support specialist who provides the support has direct experience in the specific systems (juvenile justice, child welfare, mental health) impacting the parent receiving support. Research shows that family peer support can increase satisfaction, knowledge, self-efficacy and even hope and a focus on increasing parent skills so that parents can better help their child makes an impact.

Keys for Networking, a family-run organization in Kansas, has pioneered the use of Targeted Parent Assistance (TPA), a model where family peer support is designed, implemented and measured to increase parent skills including being articulate, resourceful, persistent and strategic. In this model, family peer support is targeted to increase parent engagement traits which in the short term increases parent skills and in the long term improves child outcomes. For instance, when a parent is first offered support, they may feel too overwhelmed to participate in services or assist their child. By increasing the trait of persistence, the parent

moves from receiving a lot of help to less help, to being able to persist more often and better advocate for their child. (J. Adams, et al, 2006).

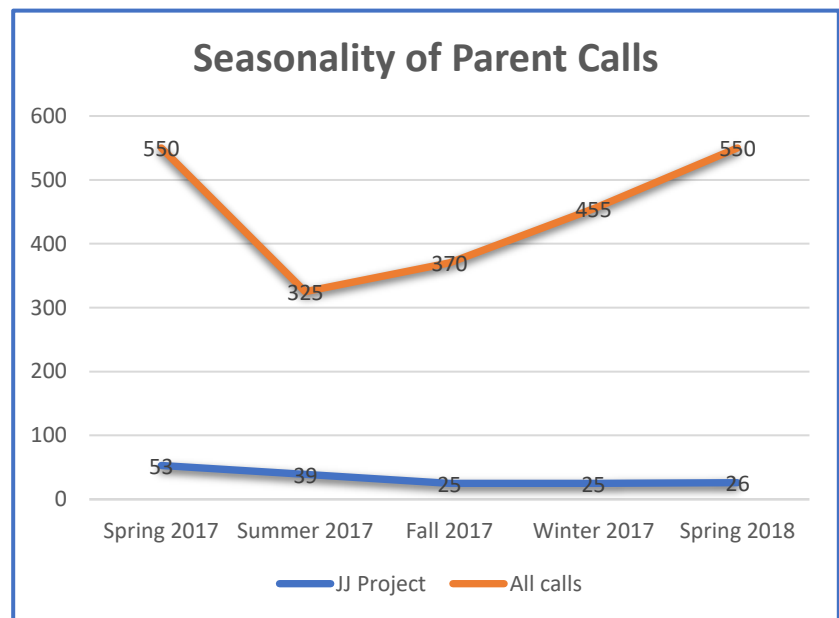
In Spring 2018, Parent/Professional Advocacy League (PPAL) designed a study based on several of the elements of parent engagement traits identified in the TPA model in order to determine if family peer support work had positively impacted parents whose children were justice involved. The questions were designed to measure whether the support, education and coaching by the family support specialist increased their skills to participate in the juvenile justice process, find resources and advocate for their child.

Methodology

Parent/Professional Advocacy League (PPAL) surveyed parents whose youth were justice-involved by administering two questionnaires/surveys by phone in the spring and summer of 2018. All the parents had received parent peer support from a PPAL family support specialist in the previous 12 months. The survey questions were designed to assess how parent peer support had impacted parents. PPAL receives requests and calls from parents throughout the year and the number of calls spikes seasonally in the spring. For calls and requests for assistance from parents whose youth are justice involved, there is no seasonal increase.

PPAL developed a set of structured questions based on the description of parent engagement traits found in the Targeted Parent Assistance model in order to determine the impact of parent peer support for families of justice-involved youth. The questions were asked during two sequential rounds of structured phone surveys. All parents who participated had a child who was or had been justice involved and also had received parent peer support in the previous 12

months. For the first phone survey, there were a total of 34 structured questions and one open ended question. The second survey had a shorter set of questions with 12 structured questions and one open ended question. Questions in the first survey included demographic questions and questions on what services had been accessed (school, therapy) and were not repeated during the second telephone survey.



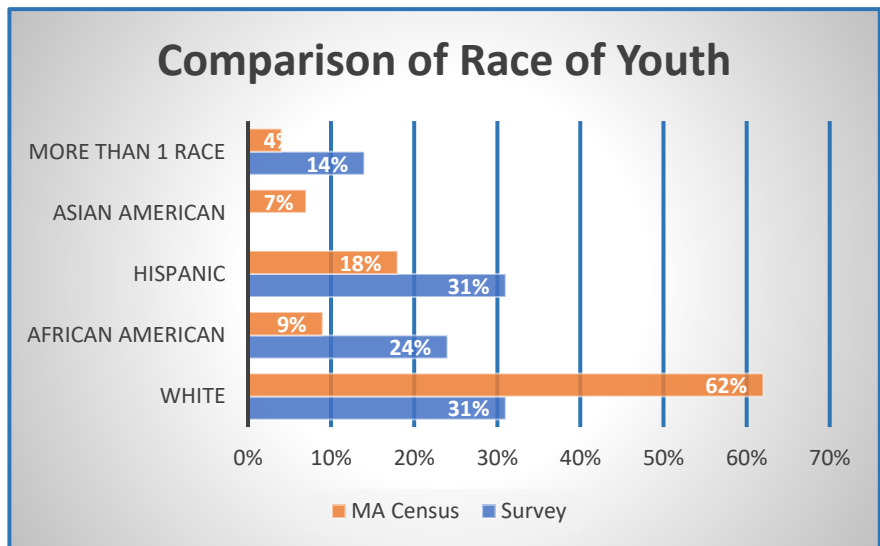
The first set of interviews was conducted from February to April 2018 and the follow up, or second round, during August 2018. The calls and interviews were provided in English or Spanish, depending on the preference of the parents. Because many families worked different shifts or stressed their difficulty in finding time for the interviews, times were offered on weekdays, weekends, evenings and early mornings as well as during regular business hours. Each phone interview averaged 30 minutes.

A total of 151 families were contacted during the first round of interviews. Most families were contacted multiple times via phone, text messages or email before they were reached and agreed to participate. A large number of families were hesitant to respond to initial calls, texts and emails. Even when phone appointments were set up, many families did not answer the phone. 30 families completed the first survey after 517 contacts or an average of 2.3 contacts/parent. All 30 families agreed to be contacted for the second round of phone interviews and 21 completed the follow up survey, after more than 90 contacts by phone and text message. In the second round, a small gift card was given to those who participated. Although surveys were available in Spanish, only two families completed the survey in Spanish.

Interviews were conducted by PPAL staff not directly involved in the juvenile justice project. They began each survey explaining that while they were acquainted with the staff person who had provided parent peer support, they had a different role. This was done so that the parents would understand how PPAL had access to their email, cell phone or other personal information and be aware of the reason for contact. At the beginning of each set of questions, PPAL staff clearly explained the reason the information was being collected and obtained consent for the interview.

The Families and Youth

All (100%) of the respondents were female and 90% identified themselves as the mother of the justice involved child. The others were directly raising the involved child and identified as a grandmother, aunt or guardian. 38% were Hispanic, 28% were African American and another 28% were white with the rest



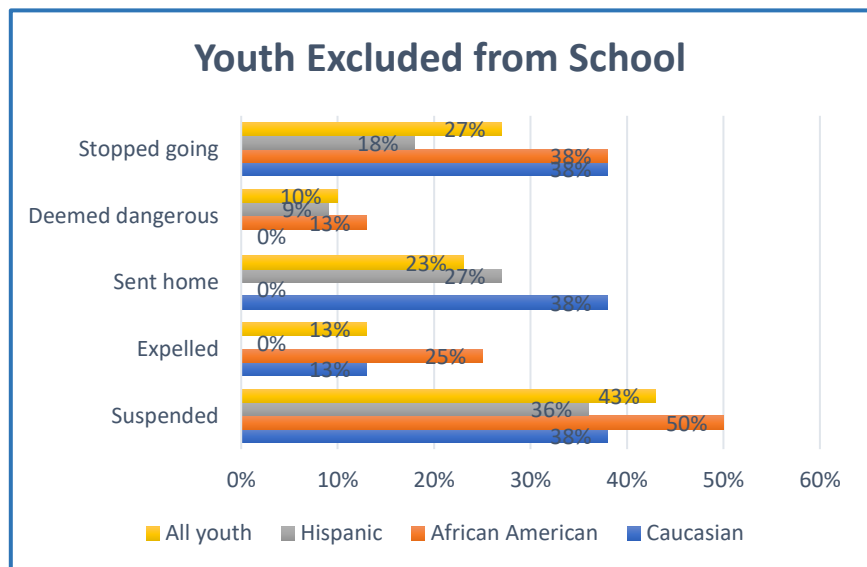
reported having more than one race/ethnicity. 30% spoke a language other than English at home (21% spoke Spanish at home while 3.5% spoke Haitian Creole, the rest spoke a smattering of other languages). Families reported multiple denials or delays of services, including special education services, or a lack of access to care in the prior 24 months.

The mean age of the youth was 15.9 years with ages ranging from 14 to 18 years. Comparison of race/ethnicity of youth whose families responded to the survey showed that youth of color were overrepresented compared to the data on youth in Massachusetts in the last census (Kids Count, 2017). 90% of the youth were identified as male.

School experiences

The majority (73%) reported that their child had received special education services in the past 24 months. Overall, 53% stated that their child was on an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and another 21%

reported their child was on a 504 plan. When analyzed by race/ethnicity of the child, 88% of Caucasian youth had an IEP or 504 plan as well as 80% of Hispanic youth. By contrast, only 63% of African American youth had an IEP or 504 plan. An additional 11% of parents reported that their child had received special education



services in the past but not at the time of the interview. Another 21% reported that their child received no special education services. 4% reported that they had tried to access special education for their child but had not been successful; all of these respondents had African American children.

When asked if their child had been excluded from school in the past 24 months, 56% replied that they had. Of those, 43% reported that their child had been suspended and another 13% said their child had been expelled. When analyzed by race/ethnicity, 25% of African American youth had been expelled and far fewer Caucasian youth (13%) and no Hispanic youth had been expelled. In addition, 50% of African American youth had been suspended while only 38% of Caucasian youth and 36% of Hispanic youth had. Of all respondents, less than one in four (23%) reported that their child had been sent home without being formally expelled or suspended. Again, there were significant differences by race/ethnicity. African American youth (13%) were

most likely to be sent home from school with instructions that they required an evaluation of their “dangerousness” before they could return. 27% of respondents stated that their child had stopped going to school and only 13% said their child had never been excluded from school. 11% of parents also reported that the school suggested they file a Child Requiring Assistance (CRA) petition on their child. More than one answer was possible for this question.

At the second set of interviews, the results were improved. 57% reported that their child had not been suspended, sent home from school or expelled in the previous two months. Only two families filed a CRA after the family support specialist worked with them.

Encounters with Law Enforcement

Nearly all respondents said their child had had an encounter with law enforcement in the previous 24 months. The majority (78%) reported that their child had been arrested, most more than once and 17% had received a warning. Of those, 50% of Caucasian youth had received a warning as well as 11% of Hispanic youth; no parents of African American youth reported they had received a warning. All reported, however, that their child had been arrested. Of all families, 17% said the school resource officer (SRO) had arrested their child; the percent of African American students arrested by an SRO was nearly double (29%) that number. Although 43% of all families stated that they had called the police themselves because of an issue with their child, the majority of these parents were Caucasian or Hispanic; only 14% of African American parents made a call to the police. 22% also said that they had called the mobile crisis team but that the team said they were unable to respond. The mobile crisis team either then called the police themselves or told the parent to do so. One parent commented, “I guess youth mobile crisis needs more funding.”

“We went to court because I called the police to Section 12 him but the police took him to the hospital because he was suicidal. When we got to the hospital, they tried to restrain him and he felt threatened and became violent. They then took him to a mental health facility. A week later I received a letter in the mail that they pressed charges.” – mom of 15-year-old son

Child Needing Assistance Petition

More than half of the parents reported that they filed or considered filing a Child Needing Assistance (CRA) petition. 11% said their child’s school recommended they file a CRA, but less than half followed through. Another 7% said that a mental health professional had recommended filing a CRA. 35% considered filing a CRA, or did file one, on their own with

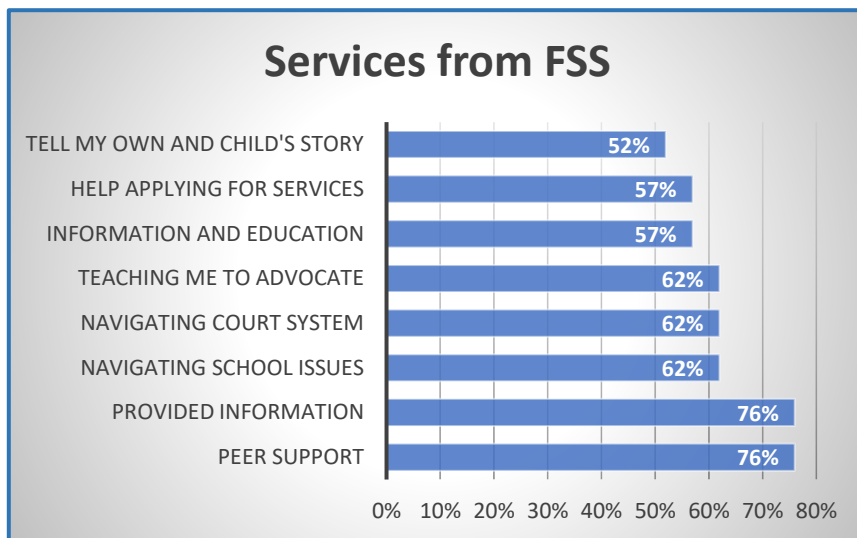
another 10% getting a recommendation to file from various sources. No one had been given this recommendation from their child’s primary care doctor, where many received their care.

Appearing in Court

All of the families reported that their child had been to court in the previous 24 months. The majority (46%) went to court for a hearing and 36% reported their child went to court because a CRA had been filed. 11% stated the reason their child had to appear in court was because of truancy and nearly all of those youth were African American. 7% said their child went to court simply to pay a fine and 64% said their child has a probation officer. Only 25% reported that their child was diverted to other services; of those, twice as many white youth were diverted as African American youth.

Family Peer Support

Each parent included in the study had received family peer support from a Family Support Specialist (FSS), employed by PPAL, in the previous 12 months. Family peer support is defined as informational and social support, provided from one parent to another, in order to reduce isolation, shame and blame and to assist parents in navigating child serving systems. It has an “unrelenting focus” on the parent/ primary caregiver(s) (Hoagwood, et al, 2009).



Research shows that family peer support increases self-efficacy, boosts knowledge of services and increases skills for families who receive it.

Family peer support is often customized to the needs of individual families but has common elements including system navigation, help locating community resources, coordination with other services, education and information, advocacy in accessing care and benefits, building skills, access to training and connections to other parents with similar challenges.

Each parent was given a list of the types of support that may have been provided by the PPAL family support specialist and asked to identify which types had been provided. The top nine types of support they reported were:

- Was provided with information they didn't have before (76%)
- Received one to one support (76%)
- Was helped in navigating court system (62%)
- Was helped in navigating school issues (62%)
- Received teaching and coaching to advocate for their child (62%)
- Received help in applying for services (57%)
- Received information about support groups, training and education (57%)
- Was taught to tell their child's story, and their own, effectively (52%)
- Was connected to needed resources (48%)

Because parents were provided with the types of support that matched their needs, this list also reflects the needs and challenges most often faced by the families. One or two families had also requested specific help in finding a support group for their child or finding care for themselves. One mother remarked, "She was a great help to me. She provided me with resources and support in the court. And continues to help me."

*It helped that she's a parent with lived experience. She provided me with resources and support in court. And continues to help me.
– parent of justice-involved youth*

Impact of Family Peer Support

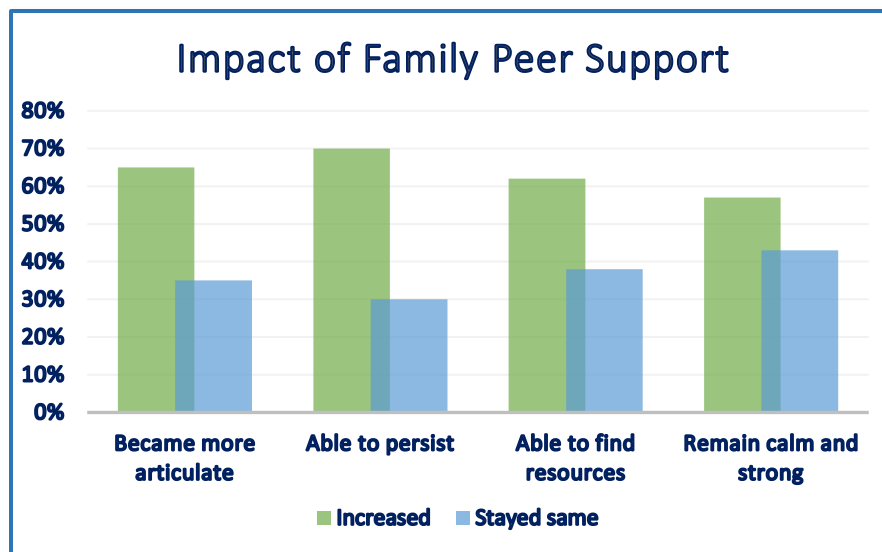
Family peer support is intended to build skills and increase knowledge as well as helping families through challenging situations. Participants were asked to assess whether the family peer support they received had created specific results. This included being more articulate, able to persist in the face of challenges, better able to find the resources their child and family needs and have an increased ability to remain calm even when questioned or challenged. One parent remarked, "I really appreciate that this type of family support exists. I was lost and didn't know what to do."

Parents reported the most significant impact was in their ability to persist and keep going until they found what they needed. Many families who feel overwhelmed and underprepared find it difficult to keep showing up for meetings or court appearances, to keep asking for services their child needs or to remain determined that they will try yet another time. 70% of parents who received family peer support reported that their ability to persist and keep going till they found

what they needed had increased. 40% said it had improved a great deal and 30% said it increased somewhat. One mother stated, “I really appreciate the fact that this service exists. I was lost and didn’t know what to do. I was going through a crisis.”

Many parents also find it difficult to articulate what has worked for their child and what has not as well as asking for better information. This leaves them with incomplete knowledge or feeling as if they haven’t done an

adequate job of advocating for their child. After receiving family peer support, 65% of parents said their ability to describe clearly what works or not for their family had increased. 45% said it had improved a great deal, while 20% said it increased somewhat. One parent added, “We had a lot of conversation and communication. She helped me learn the terminology which helped build my confidence.”



Many respondents described their inability to find community and formal resources and access them. One parent commented, “I wish I had had more knowledge about what kinds of help and resources are available to my family before this.” Another stated, “I really wish I had known more about what resources were available to families involved with the juvenile justice system before this.” After receiving family peer support, 62% of parents said their ability to find resources their child and family needed, even when it seemed nothing was out there, had increased. More than a third (38%) said this skill had increased a great deal and 24% said it had increased somewhat.

Families can feel blamed, overwhelmed and distraught when they are in challenging situations. When this happens, they are unable to advocate for their child, share information and hear clearly what others are telling them. Being able to remain calm is an important skill that is fostered by family peer support. More than half of the respondents (57%) reported that their ability to be calm and strong, even when the school or court questioned them or disagreed with them, had increased. 34% said it had increased a great deal and an additional 24% said it had increased somewhat. As one parent put it, “I’ve learned how to deal with situations and I’m not stressing out as much as I used to.”

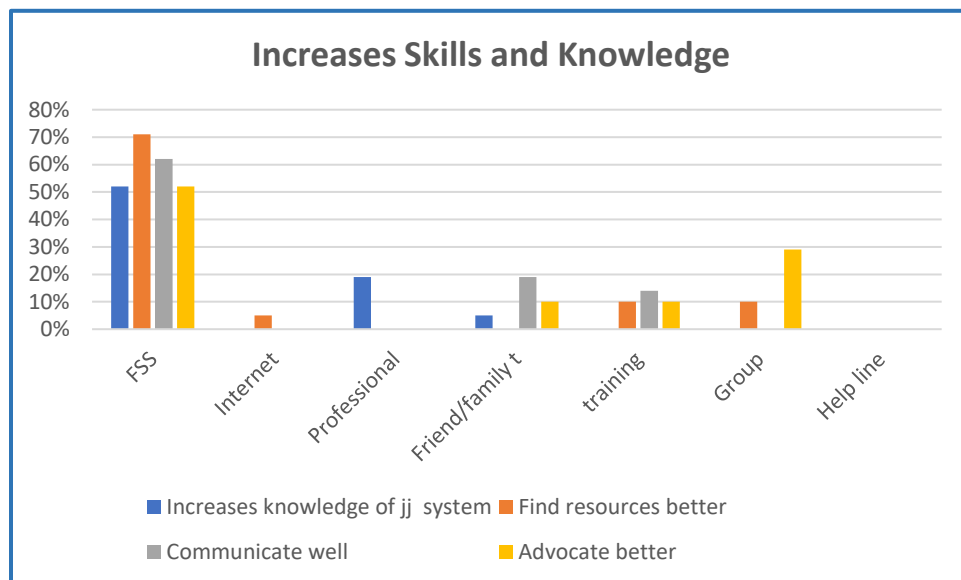
Increase in Skills and Knowledge

Families were asked to rate, based on their personal experiences, what most helps families increase their knowledge of the juvenile justice. They were given a range of choices from working one to one with a knowledgeable family support specialist (FSS) to finding information on their own via the internet. 52% of parents said talking to a knowledgeable FSS increased their knowledge of the juvenile justice system. Only 19% said talking to a lawyer, judge or probation officer helped them better understand the system. None believed that resources on the internet were helpful to them. Both African American and Hispanic families were 66% more likely to identify one to one support from a family support specialist as their top choice for gaining knowledge.

She was great. She helped me and walked me through the steps. Helped me learn the terminology and gave me confidence. She connected me with resources that even the court couldn't connect me with.

71% of families reported that a knowledgeable FSS also increased their ability to find resources. Only 10% found looking online to be helpful and none found calling a help or information line to be useful to them. An additional 10% found going in person to a training or workshop helped them improve their ability to find the resources they needed. Another 10% found that going to a parent support group had been helpful.

When asked to rate what improved their ability to communicate and ask for what their child



and family needed, families also highly rated working one to one with an FSS. 62% said a knowledgeable FSS increased their communication skills while only 19% said getting help from a friend or family member who is good at communicating had

helped. Another 14% said attending a workshop was effective and none agreed that resources on the internet were helpful.

Last, when asked what helps families to become a better advocate so they can ask for what their child and family needs, 52% said talking to an FSS had helped the most. 29% also rated an in person or online parent support group as an excellent way to improve their advocacy skills, while 10% said attending a workshop was helpful. Another 10% said they had learned from a friend or family member.

Repeatedly, parents volunteered that they wish they had known about one to one family peer support earlier. One remarked, “Her knowledge of the juvenile justice system made a big difference. She was willing to advocate for our child. I was lost and didn’t know what to do.” Parents said again and again that getting connected with resources, including clinical help, advocacy at school and within the court system, help with navigating the system and the reservoir of knowledge of the FSS they worked with made an enormous impact.

Top Five Challenges for Families

The value families placed on their skill building and increase in knowledge is important to many families. However, families whose children are justice involved face significant challenges. They require skills that directly correlate with the challenges they face. Families identified the same challenges consistently.

The top five challenges were:

1. *Being ignored or not listened to.* One parent noted that “there is a lot of deflection and actual issues aren’t tackled. Then there is no actual progress and things get worse.” Parents who became more articulate and were able to clearly identify the needs of their child and family became more effective at having their concerns clearly heard.
2. *Being blamed or seen as part of the problem.* One mother noted, “The whole system puts the responsibility on the parent.” When parents were able to increase their ability to persist or be calm in the face of blame, they saw themselves as more effective.
3. *Lack of communication about their child’s needs or issues.* Many families felt initially confused about their child’s needs and were unable to look for resources, including school and clinical resources to address them. One mother noted, “I wish they would have listened to my concerns. Filing a CRA didn’t help my son, it made things worse.” When families were able to communicate more effectively and ask direct questions, this improved communication in many cases.

“I wish I would have known the outcome of getting the JJ system involved. I thought the JJ system would help.”
4. *Lack of communication about the process.* One parent commented, “I didn’t understand the law and my rights as a parent.” When a youth becomes justice involved, their parents often

don't understand the process, possible options or where to find help. When they receive family peer support, which can guide them through the process, they feel calmer and can advocate better for their child.

5. *Few learning opportunities for families.* Parents whose child is involved in the juvenile justice system have a steep learning curve. While they may find workshops on special education or information on child trauma available, there is little tailored to their experiences within the juvenile justice system and less yet that is focused on parent needs.

Conclusions

Family peer support is effective in building skills and self-efficacy for families. By providing one-to-one support and skill building that is customized to the needs of individual families, it can both increase parent skills and have a secondary, positive impact on their children. It is particularly effective in increasing the ability of parents to persist and keep going, even when they feel overwhelmed and underprepared. It also positively impacts the ability of parents to articulate clearly what works and what doesn't for their child and family as well as asking for information they need. Family peer support directly improves parents' ability to find the resources their child and family needs, even when they don't believe there are resources available to them. Last, family peer support improves parents' ability to remain calm and strong, even when questioned or disagreed with by the court or school.

Families whose children are justice involved were mistrustful and reluctant to provide the personal information asked for in the survey. Many opted not to participate because of their concerns. As a result, the sample size is small. Those that did participate began with one word answers and were sharing anecdotes and personal stories at the end of the survey questions. Their level of comfort with the oral survey process and understanding of how their participation could have a positive impact increased slowly and for many, was a new concept.

The inequity in the experience of families of color, especially African American families, was apparent. When schools decided to take disciplinary action, parents reported that twice as many African American youth were expelled as Caucasian youth and were the only group sent home from school with instructions that they receive an evaluation of their "dangerousness" before they could return. White students were 1.4 times as likely to receive special education services than African American students and the protections that accompany it. In addition, African American youth were twice as likely to be arrested by a school resource office as a white student. They were also less likely to report that they had received diversion.

Increasing parent skills and knowledge as well teaching them that they add value when they participate is a direct result of family peer support. The family peer support given to the survey respondents was tailored to the challenges they encountered with their justice involved

children. Although the focus of this study was on the impact of family peer support for parents, it is notable that the majority reported that their child was not suspended, expelled or removed from school after working with the family support specialist, a secondary impact.

While the use of family peer support for families whose children are justice involved is still in its beginning stages, the impact is clear. It directly improves skills, confidence and self-efficacy for parents. As the juvenile justice system continues to shift so that more youth are diverted to the community, the role of their families increases instead of being transferred to program staff. It is important that those families can access services that allows them to fulfill that role.

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