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# Intervention among Children of Substance Abusers and School Success

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## ABSTRACT

*In substance abuse prevention literature findings indicate that children who grow up in households where there is alcohol and other drug abuse are much more likely to exhibit problematic, dysfunctional behavior, such as delinquency, drinking and drug use. The purpose of this study was to assess the applicability and effectiveness of intervention among African-American children of substance abusers, particularly in terms of school achievement. A modified version of the student assistance services model was used. Specifically, this study examined the impact of the independent variable—the number of times the student participated in the counseling program, on the dependent variables of interest fourth quarter grade point average and fourth quarter absenteeism as documented in final report cards. The results indicate that this intervention technique of socialization of at-risk youth toward alcohol and other drugs and toward coping with addiction in one's family improves academic performance among African-American youths.*

## **Introduction**

### **Review of the Literature**

In substance abuse prevention literature, findings indicate that children who grow up in households where there is alcohol and other drug abuse are much more likely to exhibit problematic, dysfunctional behavior, such as delinquency, drinking and drug use (Kandel, Kessler, & Margulies, 1978; Hawkins, Lishner, Jenson, & Catalano, 1987; Kumpfer, 1987). This has spawned recent attention by the federal government and private counselors to specifically address the needs of these children (Brown & Mills, 1987; NIAAA, 1985; OSAP, 1988, No. 4). At a recent conference of the National Association of Children of Alcoholics, held February 28-March 3, 1988, in New Orleans, it was estimated that about 20%-25% of American students are children of substance abusers (Moe, 1988). This estimate has also been cited in government literature (NIAAA, 1981). Some of the many problems associated with children growing up in family environments where there is substance abuse include: (1) school problems, such as trouble with schoolwork, academic failure, early dropout, excessive absenteeism, temper tantrums, fighting with peers, and trouble with adults (Haberman, 1966; Kumpfer & deMarsh, 1986; Morehouse, 1979) ; (2) substance abuse problems, such as heavy drinking and increased drug abuse (Barnes, Farrell, & Cairns, 1986; Johnson, Leonard, & Jacob, 1986); (3) emotional disturbances affecting social and family relationships, including emotional instability, lower self-regard and self-acceptance, higher external locus of control, higher rates of suicide, and chronic depression (NIAAA, 1985, p.7); (4) emotional neglect and physical abuse (Booz-Allen & Hamilton, 1974, as cited in NIAAA 1985; NIAAA, 1980; Woititz, 1983).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Despite the increased attention and research which has recently been devoted to the condition of children of substance abusers, gaps remain in our understanding of the many ramifications of this condition, particularly in the area of helping these children before further negative consequences can take hold. One such gap in knowledge is the effect of intervention efforts on school achievement and positive school behavior. Another gap is the role of cultural issues in intervention with children of alcoholic and drug-abusing families, particularly the impact of intervention upon different cultural groups (NIAAA, 1985). This article, a report of findings from

an intervention counseling program administered among African-American children of substance abusing families, addresses both of these gaps.

As a sociologist, the author saw the intervention as having aspects of a primary socialization as well as a resocialization process. The main agents of primary socialization, the school, the peer group, the mass media, and the community, were involved in carrying out this intervention. The school provided the setting for the socialization and students to be "socialized". The counseling took place in small peer groups and although the groups were facilitated by professional adult counselors, peer-to-peer interaction prevailed. The mass media, particularly videotaped vignettes depicting family alcoholism, peer resistance techniques, and information about the effects of alcohol and drug abuse was used to elicit group discussions. Today's adolescents, even those who are unsuccessful in school, not inclined to read, or have short attention spans, are very receptive to audio-visual media, such as, films, videotapes, and "rap" music. The community took the form of the counselors, who were African Americans themselves, from a community-based substance abuse prevention program that was external to the schools and school officials. This externality feature was important in getting the students to participate openly in their discussions, without feeling afraid of being penalized by teachers or other school officials. The author felt that incorporating all of these features would serve to strengthen the effects of the socialization. The family was not used as a means of socialization in this program. The author does not rule out however, incorporating the family, especially extended family members of children of substance abusers, in future studies.

As previously mentioned, the intervention also had aspects of the resocialization process, or being exposed to ideas or values that in one way or another conflict with what was learned in one's childhood. In many ways, intervention with children of substance abusers can be seen as a form of resocialization. Because such children have often been deprived of basic emotional validation, and sometimes even basic physical care, and have learned survivor roles that are inappropriate and mentally unhealthy, true intervention would necessitate them unlearning the values, rules of conduct, and role expectations into which they were socialized within their dysfunctional family groups. Since such children live in social groups where alcohol and other drug abuse and even illegal drug trafficking are the norms, true intervention would require these children to unlearn norms and values displayed by their immediate families and their community.

What was also appealing to the author in terms of the intervention as a socialization and resocialization process was its reliance on small primary groups, in this case support groups, as a means of carrying out these pro-

cesses. Primary groups, characterized by intimate, face-to-face associations, are basic to the development of the social self (Cooley, 1909, p. 23). Primary group socialization and resocialization through peer support groups may be necessary in order to counteract the damage that has been done by other primary groups, such as dysfunctional alcohol and drug abusing families, and drug-ridden neighborhoods.

### Further Explanation of Study's Purpose

A modified version of the student assistance services model, developed by Ellen Morehouse of Westchester County, New York, for children of substance abusing families was used as a basis for the socialization/resocialization intervention. (See NIAAA, 1984). The Westchester student assistance services model had had some success as a socialization/resocialization tool among children of substance abusers who were predominantly white high-school students in northern, urban areas. The Westchester model reported success in terms of reduced self-reported drug usage and increased anti-drug usage attitudes (Morehouse & Scola, 1986; Morehouse, 1986). Having access to the New Orleans public schools, the author wanted to pursue the applicability of this socialization/resocialization tool with other social groups, particularly younger, southern, urban African-American, working-class students. Moreover, in contrast to the Westchester study's focus on attitudinal indicators of alcohol/drug abuse prevention, the author wanted to focus on behavioral indicators of change, such as students' grades and school attendance. It is well-known in the substance abuse prevention arena that relying on students' self-reported usage of alcohol and drugs may not be as accurate as one would like, and attitudes are vulnerable to reactive bias (French & Kaufman, 1984, p.42). Hence, the use of school performance and attendance as measures of program outcome. The use of these indicators as measures of program success is accepted in substance abuse prevention literature from a methodological standpoint (French & Kaufman, 1984, pp. 42-44). In addition, research findings show academic failure to be an indicator of adolescent alcohol/drug abuse (Jessor, 1976; Robins, 1980; both as cited in Hawkins et al., 1987) and indicate that adolescent drug users are more likely to be absent from school and to cut classes (Brooks et al., 1977; Kandel, 1982).

As administrator of a community-based substance abuse prevention agency, the author had the opportunity to implement and conduct a program evaluation of an intervention undertaken with 116 at-risk, middle- and junior high school students from the New Orleans inner-city public schools in the 1988-1989 school year. The author's hypothesis was that drug pre-

vention counseling intervention would have a positive impact on middle- and junior high school African-American children of alcoholic and other drug abusing families, and on other at-risk youths, in terms of academic achievement and school attendance.

Specifically, the study examined the impact of the independent variable, the number of times the student attended the counseling sessions, on the dependent variables of interest: fourth quarter grade point average and fourth quarter absenteeism as documented on final report cards. Other independent variables were controlled, including: school of origin, grade level, previous grade point average, and previous number of times absent. Gender and race were not used as control variables, since gender cross-tabulations resulted in no noticeable differences, and about 95% of the sample was African-American anyway.

### Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study included the relatively small sample size, the fact that the sampling was based on referral from school officials, such as counselors and teachers, and the short period of intervention. The small sample reduced generalizability somewhat, but the targeted population of children was also small compared to the total population of children. The population of interest, children of substance abusers, was identified by personal recommendation of counselors and teachers, using indirect indicators, such as chronic absenteeism, sleepiness in class, behavioral problems in school, and poor grades (Morehouse & Scola, 1986, pp. 3-7). Age of student and socioeconomic status of family were also not controlled in this study. However, due to the compact nature of the targeted grade levels, most of the students fell in the age group of 11 to 14 years old. Also, since all of the students were recruited from inner-city public schools, the sample primarily reflects a working-class, African-American population.

### Further Description of the Study

#### Subjects

The subjects who participated in this intervention program were 116 male and female students enrolled in three middle- and junior high public schools in New Orleans during the 1988-1989 school year. The schools were selected with the support and cooperation of the Orleans Parish Public Schools, Drug-Free Schools, and Support Services Departments. This

helped in dealings with the educational bureaucracy. First and foremost, referrals were made by the respective school counselors and teachers for students whom they suspected to be children of alcoholics or substance abusers. Other students were referred based on their problem behavior record, high absenteeism, suspected alcohol and drug abuse experimentation, social isolation, and low grade point average—all indicators of children of substance abusers. The sample was 75% male. The three schools, School 1, School 2, and School 3 comprised 32%, 28%, and 40%, of the sample, respectively. The students ranged in grade level from sixth through ninth grades, with 22% in sixth, 22% in seventh, 29% in eighth, and 28% in ninth grades. The median grade point average for the sample's first quarter report card was 1.35, or a D, average. At the end of the second quarter report card period, just before the intervention services were to begin, the median grade point average was 1.14, also a D average. The median number of days absent for the first quarter report was three, and for the second quarter report, just prior to intervention services, the median number of days absent was five. The sample was about 95% African-American.

### Collection of Data

The Project was administered by the community-based substance abuse prevention center, which was external to the public school system's Drug-Free Schools program. This externality was one of the core concepts of the intervention, and was done to ensure the confidentiality and openness of the students' discussions and to eliminate the need for prior parental consent. In most schools, guidance counselors are in close contact with parents and other teachers, and could inhibit frankness on the part of the students, as the students might see their discussions as potentially jeopardizing to their grades and chances of promotion in school, not to mention their relationships with their parents. These were very sensitive issues, particularly for children in substance abusing households. In addition, the externally-based program provided students with access to professionals specially trained in working with youth experiencing stress associated with family addiction (NIAAA, 1984).

The direct counseling services were provided by a full-time counselor, with part-time assistance from a social worker also based at the community drug prevention center. Both were African American females with master's degrees. Their racial status helped in establishing a rapport with the students. The primary method of intervention with the students was a combination of structured socialization and resocialization activities. This took

the form of structured support group counseling about alcohol and other drugs, along with less structured group sessions on family addiction problems and how to cope with them. Peer pressure resistance techniques, alternatives to drugs, identification and communication of feelings, and identification and use of community resources to cope with family addiction problems, were some of the topics covered over the period from late February through the end of May, 1989. This corresponds to the third and fourth quarter report card periods, respectively.

Students were divided in all three schools into small groups averaging about seven students per group. There were 17 groups between the three schools. Each group met weekly, with students rotating meetings so as not to miss the same class every week. The number of counseling sessions attended by each student ranged from 0 to 11.

### Problems Encountered

Some problems were encountered in the course of the project. One in particular, was the delay in starting the project, due to delay in funding from the granting agency. This reduced the amount of time available for providing counseling sessions. However, this also provided the advantage of allowing the school officials to have a basis for their referrals in terms of the students' behavior, grade point average, and absenteeism in the first two report card periods. This also afforded the author a basis for before-after comparison for all of the students in terms of absenteeism and grade point averages within the same school year, rather than across school years, as was originally planned. In hindsight, this reduced problems of maturation effect.

Another problem, initially, was getting students to remember their group session schedules. Announcements over the loudspeaker were used at first to excuse them from their classes to attend the counseling sessions. Eventually, a second social worker assisted the main counselor by going to the classrooms to retrieve the students for the group sessions.

### Analysis of the Data

#### Techniques of the Analysis

The data obtained for each student included: school attended, gender, grade level, grade point average and number of whole days absent from school as reported for four quarters on students' report cards, number of



times student participated in the counseling sessions, level of perceived student participation in the sessions, and level of perceived student progress in the program. The data were analyzed using subroutines from the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 1988). A multiple regression analysis was conducted using grade point average and number of days absent as dependent variables. The independent variable under consideration was the number of times the student participated in the program's counseling sessions. The variable was dichotomized into low program attendance, or attending five or less times, and high program attendance, or attending six or more times. Control variables included were school attended, grade level, grade point average before inception of the program (second quarter grade point average), previous absenteeism level (number of days absent during second quarter), and the interaction effect of school and grade level. The grade point average variables were dichotomized into high (average of C or above) and low (average of D or below). Categorical or dummy variable analysis was used for the remaining nominal and ordinal level variables. The .01 level of significance was used for all statistical comparisons.

### Description of the Findings

Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the results. In Table 1, the results indicate that receiving a grade point average of C or better in the quarter report card period is significantly associated with more frequent attendance at the counseling sessions, with a  $p < .01$  level of significance. This is so even when controlling for the other independent variables of interest discussed previously. As was expected, receiving a C or better in the previous report card period was significantly associated with receiving a C or better in the fourth and final report card period. Note, too that the total variance explained by all the variables in the equation is relatively high, over 40%.

Table 2 depicts similar results. Lower absenteeism in the fourth quarter is significantly associated with program attendance, at  $p < .001$  level of significance. Also, the variables in the equation explain a little more than 25% of the variance in fourth quarter absenteeism, which is not as much as that explained in fourth quarter grade point average equation, but it is still substantial.

Table 1. Regression Analysis of the Relationship between the Dependent Variable—Fourth Quarter Grade Point Average and the Main Independent Variable—Program Session Attendance

(n=116)

<u>Independent Variables</u>	<u>Fourth Quarter Grade Point Average</u>		
	Beta	Partial Correl	T
Grade Point Average-			
Second Quarter	360	.315	4.27**
Program Session Attendance	.272	.242	3.28*
Absenteeism—Second Quarter	-.102	-.093	-1.26
Grade 8	.168	.082	1.11
School 3	-.102	-.050	-0.68
School 2/Grade 9	.132	.057	0.78
School 1/Grade 7	.126	.073	0.99
School 3/Grade 6	.064	.043	0.58
constant			2.19
		R <sup>2</sup> =.412	F=9.46**

\*\* p ≤ .001      Note: - = negative correlation (inverse relationship depicted); Blank = positive correlation.  
\* p ≤ .01

Table 2. Regression Analysis of the Relationship between the Dependent Variable—Fourth Quarter Absenteeism and the Main Independent Variable—Program Session Attendance

(n=116)

<u>Independent Variables</u>	<u>Fourth Quarter Grade Point Average</u>		
	Beta	Partial Correl	T
Program Session Attendance	-.383	-.340	4.14**
Absenteeism—Second Quarter	.214	.195	2.38
School 3/Grade 6	-.227	-.151	-1.84
School 2/Grade 9	-.349	-.151	-1.84
School 1/Grade 7	-.230	-.133	-1.62
Grade 8	-.233	-.113	-1.38
G.P.A.—Second Quarter	.032	.028	0.35
School 3	-.052	-.025	-0.31
Constant			4.76**
		R <sup>2</sup> =.270	f = 4.97**

\*\*p ≤ .001      Note: - = negative correlation (inverse relationship depicted); Blank = positive correlation.  
\*p ≤ .01

## Conclusion

The results indicate that the intervention technique of socialization and resocialization of at-risk youths toward alcohol and other drugs and addiction within the family, has successful outcomes across the various social groups, including race, region, social class, and grade level. Hence, this approach has applicability for southern, African-American, working-class, adolescent males. Moreover, the success in behavioral changes in grade performance and attendance reinforces earlier findings of attitudinal changes from a similar intervention in New York.

Secondly, the results have shed light on the effects that substance abuse intervention can have on academic achievement among children of substance abusers. As can be seen, intervention in this special high-risk population does seem to improve academic achievement, which can be a protective factor against adolescent substance abuse. This is in contrast to evaluation studies cited previously, which only documented improvement in drug usage behavior and attitudes. It is still speculative, however, how long lasting these academic improvements will be.

Finally, the intervention program and its evaluation demonstrate a variety of ways in which sociologists can make contributions to the field of alcohol/drug abuse prevention. The author, a sociologist, designed, received funding for, staffed, monitored, and evaluated the intervention as part of her duties as overall director of the community-based substance abuse prevention center under which the program was operated. While this may seem problematic for maintaining objectivity, the sociologist can wear, and, in fact, often must wear several hats in the applied arena. Carefully documenting data and keeping tab of one's different roles helps in this regard. Networking with other social science, and sociology professionals in similar settings also helps. Recently, government funding sources in the alcohol and drug abuse prevention and AIDs prevention fields have begun to emphasize the importance of program evaluation and have encouraged self evaluation even on a small scale, furnishing written guidelines and even technical assistance in many instances. With the prospect of limited human services funds and the enormous challenges of social problems, such as alcohol and drug abuse, AIDs proliferation, teen pregnancy, and homelessness, just to name a few, the sociologist in these applied settings as administrator or practitioner should be encouraged to undertake evaluation as part of his/her role, if not to render insight to the sociological discipline, then to at least improve the quality of program service in his/her area.

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