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Strengths-Based versus Deficit-Based Approaches

ABSTRACT: Research has shown that *deficit-based*, professionally-driven initiatives are not as effective at creating sustainable change as *strengths-based*, community-driven initiatives. This article will explain what deficit-based and strengths-based approaches are. It will also give examples of deficit-based programs that are not effective and strengths-based programs that are effective.

Keywords: deficit-based, strengths-based, resiliency, family, community-driven

Research has shown that strengths-based approaches work and are sustainable. Deficit-based approaches have been shown to be ineffective and sometimes even worsen behaviour.

Bogenschneider & Olson, 1998

WHY IS THIS OF INTEREST?

Deficit-based approaches have traditionally been used by the helping professions as they look for ways to help address the needs and problems within a family or community. This emphasis communicates that there is failure, helplessness, and low expectations for the families and communities. It also creates a dependency on outside resources and solutions.

A major problem with this approach is that it often comes too late, intervening after the problem is already there rather than working to prevent it in the first place (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). For those working in communities to develop effective programs for reducing risk, it makes sense to come from a strengths-based approach.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT THIS?

As strengths-based approaches are talked about and used more, research into their effectiveness has also increased. Many crime reduction programs have been used for years without much success. Research has shown that deficit-based programs focus on what children and youth are doing wrong and are not nearly as effective as programs that focus on the strengths of the children and youth. Some examples of common deficit-based programs that are less than successful follow.

Zero-Tolerance Policies - Report findings show that a zero-tolerance policy approach in schools towards bullying “may result in a high level of suspensions without full comprehension of how behaviour needs to and can be changed. It does not solve



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the problem of the bully, who typically spends more unsupervised time in the home or community if suspended or expelled” (Fox, Elliot, Kerlikowske, Newman & Christeson, 2000, p. 16).

Juvenile Crime-Based Intervention Programs Such As ‘Scared Straight’ -

This confrontational approach exposes children who are labelled ‘at-risk’ to prison life, experiences, challenges, and consequences of bad decision-making in the hope of reducing risky behaviours. Evaluation results (from nine crime intervention programs conducted in eight different states in the U.S.) showed that, despite the variability in the type of intervention used, on average these crime-intervention programs resulted in an increase in deviant and criminal behaviours (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino & Buehler, 2003, p. 53).

In contrast, a strengths-based approach focuses on what is working well to support the growth of individuals and communities. It is a perspective that is based on the assumption that people have existing competencies and resources for their own empowerment. It assumes that people are capable of solving problems and learning new skills; they are a part of the process rather than just being guided by a professional (Alliance for Children and Youth of Waterloo Region, 2009). Research has shown that strengths-based programs are more effective and the results are more sustainable.

Some examples of effective strengths-based programs follow.

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

This is a community-driven, active approach that involves teachers, parents, and students working together to brainstorm, plan, and implement strategies toward reducing bullying within elementary, middle, and junior high schools. A holistic approach in reducing risky behaviours in children within the schools involves distribution of surveys to find out the rate of bullying within schools, established school rules, adult supervision (outdoors and indoors), class meetings that educate children on the impact of bullying, and one-on-one meetings with the victims, bullies, and families (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001, pg.14). The program has produced a 50 per cent reduction in the number of incidents of bullying and antisocial behaviours such as vandalism, fighting, theft, alcohol use, and truancy. The Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, a research center based at the University of Colorado, reviewed the consistently positive results for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program in 39 schools in South Carolina. These results yielded a 20% bullying reduction rate (Greenberg, Domitrovich & Bumbarger, 2001, p.14).

The Incredible Years

The Incredible Years is an anti-aggression program for children ages two to eight years of age. The program’s counsellors works with parents, teachers, and family service workers to enhance their knowledge, skills, and capacities in improving positive social behaviours in all children. This prevention program is an inclusive initiative that works to strengthen positive social and problem-solving skills in all children, therefore eliminating labelling or segregation of children who are perceived to be ‘at-risk’ (Fox et al., 2000, pg. 14). An evaluation conducted in a Head Start setting found that one year af-

ter the program ended, 80% of the children in the program were within an acceptable range for problem behaviours, while only 48% of the children not in the program were within that acceptable range (Fox et al., 2000, p. 16).

The Seattle Social Development Project

The Seattle Social Development Project is a comprehensive universal prevention program that addresses multiple risk and protective factors within the child, family, school, and community (based on an ecological framework). The core emphasis is creating and maintaining strong school and family relationships (Hawkins,

Catalano, Morrison, O'Donnell, Abbott & Day, 1992, as cited in Greenberg, Domitrovich & Bumbarger, 2001). This program combines modified teacher practices within the school context, proactive classroom management, interactive teaching, cooperative learning, and parent training programs across a six-year intervention period (Greenberg et al., 2001). To assess the effects of full intervention and late intervention, a non-randomized controlled trial was implemented (Hawkins et al., 1992, as cited in Greenberg et al., 2001). The findings indicated that students in the full intervention group reported significantly stronger attachment to school, improvement in self-reported achievement, and less involvement in school misbehaviour than did the controls (Hawkins et al., 1992, as cited in Greenberg et al., 2001).

Just as communities need to be the driving force in strengths-based initiatives, so do families. A major shift is necessary to concentrate on what families are doing right, rather than focusing on what they are doing wrong. Through first recognizing the strengths of the children and family, we can have something great to build on which then leads to a sense of hope and optimism for the future. As adults working with children, try to find the strengths these children demonstrate in their actions. When challenges arise, take the time to see and acknowledge these strengths. This can make all the difference in enhancing the positive behaviours and reducing the negative ones. Just as communities need to be the driving force in strengths-based initiatives, so do families. A major shift is necessary to concentrate on what families are doing right, rather than focusing on what they are doing wrong. Through first recognizing the strengths of the children and family, we can have something great to build on which then leads to a sense of hope instead of hopelessness. For example, as adults working with children, try to find the strengths these children demonstrate in their actions. When challenges arise, take the time to see and acknowledge these strengths. This can make all the difference in enhancing the positive behaviours and reducing the negative ones. Be encouraged that it can work!



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Some examples of strengths-based, **COMMUNITY-DRIVEN** initiatives in Calgary are:

The Brentwood Community Garden

The Calgary Foundation's Neighbour Grants program allowed the Brentwood Community Gardening Group to work toward fulfilling their mission of "promoting inter-generational community- sustainable gardening and urban agriculture in the Brentwood neighbourhood of Calgary" (The Calgary Foundation, 2010). The community garden brings together neighbours and engages them to create a vibrant community. This community-driven initiative has been sustainable and is continuing to flourish because it began by building on the existing capacities of those living in the community.

Patrick Airlie School Wall Mural Project

The Patrick Airlie School community in Forest Lawn launched a mural project in Spring 2009 to beautify their school grounds and to strengthen their connections with their surrounding neighbourhood (The Calgary Foundation, 2010). Following is part of what the Calgary Foundation's website said about the project:

The response from the community to the Patrick Airlie School Mural Project was generous and gratifying. Students, parents, teachers, neighbours, local businesses, and community service providers all joined in, under the skilled direction of artists from Urban Youth Worx. Four hundred people of various ages and ethnicities pitched in, a remarkable achievement for a small elementary school of under 200 students.

Project organizers are proud of the beautiful mural on the side of Patrick Airlie School and the strengthened sense of community and citizenship the project created. They give particular praise to their students who responded enthusiastically to what for many was a first chance to participate in the community. People care about the schools in their neighbourhoods and one way to turn that caring into action is to organize local projects that offer informal and drop-in opportunities to participate. (The Calgary Foundation, no date.)

HOW DOES THIS CONNECT TO THE S4 PROJECT?

Start Smart Stay Safe (S4) is a strengths-based approach to enhance resiliency among children and their families. The project is centred around building on what children and their families are doing well. **The Children's Project** is about enhancing existing relationships and awareness of personal strengths. **The Family Project** is driven by the families themselves through the recognition and enhancement of existing strengths.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES?

These programs have been successful and are sustainable because they are driven by the existing groups of people in the community, rather than by a professional coming in to fix the problem. When the needs of the community are the driving force for outside interventions, survival may become the only goal. When the internal assets of the community are the priority and existing resources are built upon, the effectiveness and power of the community can be multiplied and sustainable (Kretzmann & Mcknight, 1993).

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT:

- What initiatives in your community are successful?
- How can you support community initiatives that are driven by the community members?
- How can you make your everyday life more strengths-based?

KEY TERMS:

Community-Driven – When existing groups of people in the community—rather than professionals—drive change and enhancement. Community-driven initiatives happen when the internal assets of the community are the priority and when the existing resources (built upon the effectiveness and power of the community) can be multiplied and sustained (Kretzmann & Mcknight, 1993).

Deficit-Based – An approach that tends to focus on needs and problems in people or helping people avoid risks associated with negative outcomes. These risk-based interventions do not sustain change (Skodol, 2010).

Resiliency – Defined in many ways (Smith, Tooley, Christopher & Kay, 2010), “resiliency,” according to the English definition, means “to bounce or spring back” (Simpson, 2005). Expanding upon this definition is “resiliency” as the ability to cope with challenges or stress in ways that are effective and result in an increased ability to respond well to future adversity (Alliance for Children and Youth of Waterloo Region, 2009).

Strengths-Based – An approach that focuses on what is working well to support the growth of individuals and communities. It is a perspective based on the assumption that people have existing competencies and resources for their own empowerment. It assumes that people are capable of solving problems and learning new skills, that they are a part of the process rather than just being guided by a professional (Alliance for Children and Youth of Waterloo Region, 2009).



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