

Culturally appropriate programming:

What do we know about evidence-based programs for culturally and ethnically diverse youth and their families?

WHAT WORKS, WISCONSIN – RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SERIES

ISSUE #1, JANUARY 2007

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With the growing interest in evidence-based programs for the prevention of juvenile delinquency and other youth problems comes an increased concern about the cultural appropriateness of these programs for youth and families from various cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. The current research on how programs might vary in their effectiveness for youth and families from different cultural backgrounds is not conclusive. However, there is a growing body of research that is beginning to provide some insights. In this paper, we summarize what is known and what areas are in need of more research.

Why is cultural fit a concern?

The concern about the effectiveness of evidence-based programs with youth and families from various cultural backgrounds is legitimate. Race, ethnicity, culture, and experience have profound effects on how individuals perceive and react to the world around them. It is important to remember that culture encompasses much more than racial and ethnic background. A family's culture may also be defined by their socioeconomic status or class; whether they live in an urban, suburban, or rural community; their religious traditions and beliefs; or the parents' level of education. For recent immigrant families, length of residency in the United States and how vested individual family members are in the culture, language, and traditions of their country of origin may also be incorporated into definitions of culture. Assessing whether an intervention is appropriate for a particular audience means considering how all of these and other factors will affect participants' experiences in the program or curriculum.

It is also evident that programs and interventions can reflect the cultures of their developers. At the surface level, the program developer's culture might be reflected in the language used and the format of the program. On a deeper level, culture influences the goals set for participants as well as the program activities and strategies used to achieve those goals. Basic factors in program design, such as the risk and protective factors that are addressed, are culturally dependent. Many evidence-based programs have been developed by White researchers. While they try to be unbiased and culturally neutral, a close examination suggests that program developers' own cultural perspectives are often reflected in the decisions and assumptions they make as they design the program. Therefore, it is important to question whether the "culture" of a program is a good fit for participants of various cultural backgrounds, and how that fit might influence the effectiveness of the program with those participants.

What is known about the effectiveness of evidence-based programs with various cultural groups?

In addition to considering the cultural content and grounding of evidence-based programs, it is important to look at the audiences with which they have been shown to work. A number of evidence-based programs have only been tested on samples of predominately White youth and families, which brings into question whether they would have the same effect with more culturally diverse audiences. However, as shown to the right, many of the most impressive results of evidence-based programs have come from program evaluations with culturally and racially diverse participants. Several programs have been evaluated and found effective with urban, African American participants. Indeed, many evidence-based programs have been tested and

found to work with fairly diverse populations of youth and families. The box on pages 2 and 3 indicates the population groups that have been

Selected evidence-based programs and the cultural backgrounds of their evaluation participants

Abecedarian

All participants were low-income; 98% were African American. The program was implemented in North Carolina.

Adolescent Diversion/ Michigan State Diversion Project

One evaluation had a sample consisting of about one-quarter ethnic minority individuals, and three-quarters White individuals.

Big Brothers Big Sisters

In Public-Private Ventures' large-scale evaluation, more than half of the sample consisted of ethnic minority youth. A key feature of this program is that local agencies customize it to fit population needs. Its effectiveness may depend in part on whether the program is well-adapted to fit various cultural and ethnic groups.

Chicago Child-Parent Centers

Many racial and ethnic groups were represented in evaluations. Program and comparison group children were from primarily low-income families in inner-city Chicago.

Family Effectiveness Training

This program was created specifically for Hispanic families to address differences in acculturation between parents and children. It has not been evaluated with any other populations.

Functional Family Therapy

This intervention was originally designed for middle-class families. However, it has been implemented with families from varying income levels as well as racial and ethnic backgrounds. A replication project in Las Vegas found the program to be effective with a highly diverse population of juvenile offenders and their families.

Job Corps

In Mathematica's large-scale evaluation, more than 70 percent of participants were racial or ethnic minorities.

Multi-dimensional Treatment Foster Care

The largest evaluation of MTFC consisted of 85 percent White individuals and 15 percent ethnic minority individuals.

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represented in studies of some of the most effective evidence-based programs for juvenile delinquency prevention.

Selected evidence-based programs and the cultural backgrounds of their evaluation participants, continued

Multisystemic Therapy

Evaluations consisted of both African American and White individuals. In one study where race was examined as a moderator, the program's effects did not vary by race. In other words, the program was equally effective for both groups.

Nurse-Family Partnership

Large scale-evaluations in Elmira, NY, Memphis, TN, and Denver, CO, had participants from diverse backgrounds; primarily this program targets lower-income families.

Olweus Bullying Prevention

This program was developed in Norway; evaluations with U.S. and European samples have contained mostly White participants. Overall, European evaluations have had more promising results than the U.S. evaluations of this program. In one evaluation in South Carolina, the sample consisted of African American and White students. Here, the results were generally modest.

Perry Preschool

All participants in the longitudinal study were low-income, African American children living in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Repeat Offender Program

The evaluation consisted of 82 percent racial and ethnic minority individuals.

Skills, Opportunities, and Recognition

In this evaluation, about half of the sample participants were White and about half were from various racial and ethnic minority groups.

Strengthening Families for Parents and Youth 10-14

Initial evaluations in rural midwestern communities consisted of primarily White participants. However, this program has been adapted to other cultural groups such as African American, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian, Alaska Native, and Hmong, with positive evaluation results.

Note: These programs are described in the What Works, Wisconsin report. They are some of the most effective of the wide range of interventions that have been shown to reduce juvenile delinquency.

A recent study by Wilson, Lipsey and Soydan [1] examined whether commonly implemented programs that are not specifically tailored to minority audiences are equally effective for racial minority and majority youth. The authors performed a meta-analysis on 305 previously conducted evaluations of intervention programs.¹ The evaluated programs aimed to reduce criminal and antisocial behavior in delinquent or institutionalized youth. These were mainstream programs, primarily for males, and were not specifically tailored for any particular racial or ethnic group. The minority groups included in the studies were most often African-American or Hispanic. Looking at effects on recidivism, the authors found no significant differences in effectiveness across groups, and concluded that "mainstream treatments for juvenile delinquents are generally effective and no less effective for ethnic minority youth than White youth" [1, p. 24]. They did find trends in the data to suggest that the effectiveness of a few particular programs was slightly less for minority youth than White youth, but the evidence was not strong enough to draw a solid conclusion.

In a review of prevention and treatment programs for mental disorders, Miranda and her colleagues [2] found that most culturally non-specific or "generic" programs were equally effective for White, African American, and Latino youth. Only two studies were identified that found programs to be less effective for minority youth than for White youth; in one of these studies, the effect disappeared when socioeconomic status was taken into account. In other words, the differences in effectiveness appeared to be a result of differences in social class, not in racial or ethnic background. Not enough youth from other ethnic minority groups were included in the reviewed studies

¹ A meta-analysis is a study of existing studies that allows researchers to examine whether there are any systematic patterns or findings that emerge across studies.

to support any conclusions about their responsiveness to these programs. In addition to its findings about culturally “generic” programs, the review also found that culturally adapted or culturally specific programs were generally effective for the youth who participated in them [2].

The findings from both of these reviews indicate that programs can be effective for audiences of various racial and ethnic backgrounds without being tailored to any particular group. However, it may well be that programs that are specifically tailored to particular minority populations are more effective than culturally “generic,” mainstream programs. A handful of studies have indicated that culturally tailored programs may be more effective [3-6], but more research is still needed.

What are the limitations of the current research?

Very few studies about the effectiveness of prevention and juvenile offender programs include the information needed to draw conclusions about program effectiveness with youth from particular racial and ethnic groups. While many evidence-based programs have shown success with participants from a variety of cultural backgrounds, it is rare for studies of program effectiveness to address cultural issues beyond simply noting race or ethnicity as one element of the demographic profile of participants. When individuals from various cultural or ethnic backgrounds participate in a study, there may be an analysis of the program’s effectiveness for each of the groups. However, cultural groups with only a small number of participants in the study are often dropped from analyses for statistical reasons, leaving a dearth of information about the effectiveness of these programs with, for example, Native American and Asian American youth.

There is also a disappointing lack of research comparing the effectiveness of using mainstream, culturally generic programs with a particular cultural group as opposed to using programs developed or adapted specifically for that cultural group. With a limited number of culturally specific and culturally adapted programs available, such research has been limited. These studies can get at the heart of the question of whether cultural adaptation of programs, or the development of programs for specific cultural groups, is worthwhile. For example, in one study immigrant Mexican and Mexican American adolescents were randomly assigned to different versions of an evidence-based substance abuse prevention program [7]. Two versions of the program – one based on Latino cultural values and one explicitly incorporating elements from many different cultures – were found to be effective. Another version, embracing mainstream American cultural values, was the least effective. The authors suggest that “strict matching” of participants to culturally grounded prevention programs may not be necessary, but that inclusion of cultural elements may increase a program’s effectiveness. In another study, two versions of a drug abuse resistance skills program were administered to inner-city New York African American and Hispanic middle school students. Immediately after the program, post-tests showed that both the culturally focused and the generic versions of the program were effective compared to a control group. A two-year follow-up revealed that the effects of both versions of the program were sustained, but that the culturally focused program had greater effects on participants than the generic program [8].

Clearly, more research is needed to determine whether culturally specific programs and program adaptations are more effective than those that are intended to be culturally neutral. However, the current research does indicate that it is possible to provide effective programming for youth from a variety of cultural backgrounds with proven, culturally generic, evidence-based programs.

WHAT WORKS, WISCONSIN: RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SERIES

This is one of a series of Research to Practice briefs prepared by the What Works, Wisconsin team at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, School of Human Ecology, and Cooperative Extension, University of Wisconsin–Extension. All of the briefs can be downloaded from:

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/families/whatworks.cfm>

This series expands upon ideas that are discussed in *What Works, Wisconsin: What Science Tells Us about Cost-Effective Programs for Juvenile Delinquency Prevention*, which is also available for download at the address given above.

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This project was supported by Grant Award No. JF-04-PO-0025 awarded by the Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance through the Wisconsin Governor's Juvenile Justice Commission with funds from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.



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