



Family Adolescent Straight Talk (FAST) — Day Suspension Program

Introduction

Family Adolescent Straight Talk (FAST) is an outpatient treatment centre in Halton Region, Ontario, that helps adolescents and families in crisis. FAST's services include crisis intervention, adolescent assessment, psychological and addictions counselling, parent counselling, anger and stress management programs, and relapse prevention programs.

The FAST Day Suspension Program, funded by the National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) from 2007 to 2009, targeted high-risk youth aged 12 to 18 who had been suspended from elementary or high school due to drug use or other anti-social behaviours including bullying, physical violence and truancy.

The primary objective of the program was to ensure that youth remained drug free during their school suspension. Secondary objectives included:

- improving participants' success in school;
- increasing participants' employability;
- strengthening pro-social relationships; and
- improving physical and mental health.

The program was designed to support productive use of the suspension period, offering participants daily academic support, employment skills training and counselling. The program pursued a holistic approach to youth care, actively involving the family and taking a preventive approach to resolve the underlying family-related issues that contributed to the youth leaving the family home, getting in trouble at school, and/or getting charged or convicted.

FAST worked with 28 elementary and high school students who had been suspended from school. Participants' suspension periods ranged from 5 to 16 days. Half-day sessions were provided on each of

these days, focusing on school work. In addition, workshops were held on relevant topics such as anger management, employment skills and illegal drug use.

The program featured a 12-week therapy cycle: youth participated in weekly one-on-one counselling sessions (at a minimum), underwent regular drug testing, and had follow-up contact and support. Some youth have continued to meet with FAST staff for more than a year after the end of the program. FAST provided education and counselling sessions to 57 family members of participants as a way to help rebuild relationships.

Evaluation of the Program

As an outcome evaluation, the primary objective was to determine if the program objectives were achieved. The evaluation used a single group post-test design, involving:

- **Client statistical tracking** (N=28) — Key indicators related to school attendance, performance, drug use, etc., were documented.
- **Document review** — This review included project reports, promotional materials, intake forms, family contracts, etc.
- **Drug testing** — FAST implemented comprehensive drug testing for participants to promote healthy behaviour and to ensure they were drug free and ready to meet the conditions of their transition back to school. This provided a key source of objectively verifiable information to evaluators about the short-term outcomes of the program.

- **Surveys** — Questionnaires were completed by participants (N=28) and parents (N=28) at the end of the program. Questions included: participants' current circumstances, levels of high-risk behaviour, educational history, levels of drug use, health, program participation and participant satisfaction.
- **Case studies** — In-depth questionnaires were administered to the families of one successful client and one client who did not complete the program. These instruments incorporated specific measures to assess attitudinal change and were designed to provide further information about client outcomes in the absence of a pre-testing phase.
- **Telephone interviews** — The Program Director conducted telephone interviews with participants (N=7) and parents (N=28). Interviews were conducted about six months and one year after participants completed the program, and the results were triangulated with the other sources of information to verify the findings.

Key Findings

The evaluation verified the following outcomes:

Reduced drug use and abstinence

Marijuana had been participants' drug of choice, while a range of other illicit drugs were also being used prior to the participants' suspension. The results of drug testing confirmed that 93 percent of participants were successful in becoming drug free and maintaining abstinence during the six-week observation and drug-testing period after the program.

Success in school

All program participants kept up with academic assignments during the suspension period, and all but two re-entered elementary and secondary school and made significant positive changes in their approach and attitude to education. They improved their school performance, increasing their grades by an average of 25 percent. Five of the seven survey respondents (with their parents concurring) identified themselves as honours students. First-year participants who were contacted after one year expressed an interest in moving on to post-secondary education. The high success rate of participants was due to their increased perception of the importance of education and a recognition that they would not be allowed to return to school unless they stopped using drugs.

Increased employability

All participants maintained or obtained part-time employment. The participants who had been selling drugs found part-time jobs and learned how to live with reduced income from legitimate employment as opposed to money from drug sales.

Strengthened pro-social relationships

The program enhanced participants' ability to communicate effectively and rebuild trusting relationships with their family and friends. A customized family contract was developed, outlining an action plan to repair relationships with family members and/or facilitate a return home. This contract was signed by both the client and his or her family. All participants reported progress in making positive personal changes and in strengthening relationships with family and friends.

Improved physical and mental health

All survey respondents indicated that their physical and mental health had improved as a result of the program. There was a significant improvement in the health and behaviour of participants who had previously engaged in self-mutilating behaviours (cutting and/or burning). Female participants were found to require more extensive professional help, experiencing more depression and eating disorders, and practising more self-mutilation. The program referred female participants to other programs that could address eating disorders, other mental disorders and unsafe sexual practices.

Recommendations

Parents played a pivotal role in this FAST program, and it was found that the active engagement of family was critical to the success of most participants. The evaluation recommended that the Day Suspension Program add a parental support group to future programs (during and after treatment) to give parents the opportunity to discuss their situation with others experiencing the same issues. The evaluation report also recommended that future FAST evaluations be designed to document longitudinal changes for a range of outcome variables and include a pre-test questionnaire.

Conclusion

The FAST Day Suspension Program successfully supported suspended students and helped them to: address behaviours related to drug use; reconnect with school and improve their school attendance and grades. The program also helped youth to: increase employability, strengthen pro-social relationships with family and peers and connect youth to programs to address physical and mental health issues.

For more information or to receive a copy of the final evaluation report, please contact the National Crime Prevention Centre at 1-877-302-6272 or visit our website at: www.PublicSafety.gc.ca/NCPC

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