



OJJDP FACT SHEET

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Families and Schools Together

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The Families and Schools Together (FAST) program addresses the urgent social problems of youth violence and chronic juvenile delinquency by building and enhancing youth's relationships with their families, peers, teachers, school staff, and other members of the community. These relationships form a social safety net of multifaceted protective factors for young, at-risk children that helps them to succeed at home, in school, and in the community and to avoid becoming delinquent, violent, or addicted. This safety net helps prevent:

- ◆ Juvenile violence and crime by increasing multiple levels of social bonding.
- ◆ Family alcohol and drug abuse by increasing connections, shared routines, and resilience.
- ◆ Child abuse and neglect by reducing isolation and promoting strong families.
- ◆ School failure by promoting parental involvement for school success.

The FAST Process

To help youth succeed as adolescents and, subsequently, as adults, FAST works to (McDonald et al., 1991):

- ◆ **Enhance family functioning** by strengthening the parent-child relationship and empowering parents to become primary prevention agents for their children.
- ◆ **Prevent school failure** by improving the child's behavior and performance in school, empowering parents in their role as partners in the educational process, and strengthening the child's and family's affiliation with the school.
- ◆ **Prevent alcohol and other drug abuse in the family** by increasing the family's awareness and knowledge of substance abuse and its impact on child development and linking the family with appropriate assessment and treatment as needed.
- ◆ **Reduce the stress that families experience from daily life** by developing an ongoing support group for parents of at-risk children, linking the family with appropriate community resources, and building the self-esteem of each family member.

FAST's values and structure are based on selected research in family therapy, child psychiatry, community development, group work, and stress and social support. The FAST program helps youth succeed by creating structured opportunities for voluntary involvement in repeated, positive, personal, interactive, communicative, and bonding experiences. These relationship-building interactions take place with the children and their primary caretaking parents, families, peers, and school and community professionals. Interventions also take place with the parents and their peers.

The program begins with outreach in which parent-professional partnerships visit homes of isolated, stressed families, who are identified by schools, and invite them to the FAST meetings. The program brings together 10 to 15 families for 8 to 10 weekly sessions of carefully crafted social activities. Activities include building a family flag, sharing a family meal, singing together, playing communication games or feelings-identification games, engaging in peer activities, and parent networking. In the Special Play component, parents are coached in one-on-one, nonjudgmental, nondirective play therapy with their children. Parents continue Special Play daily at home. Research on this technique at the University of Washington's Department of Psychiatry, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, has shown it to be a successful method for reducing psychiatric symptomatology of the child (Kogan, 1980).

When families graduate from the weekly FAST sessions, they join an ongoing, school-based collective of 40 to 50 interdependent families who meet once a month for 2 years. These FASTWORKS groups are managed by families who have graduated from the program, with support from a collaborative team of culturally compatible parents and professionals. One FAST parent is a paid partner of the team, which plans and leads the activities that systematically strengthen the children's bonds to their family, school, and community (McDonald, 1991).

Funding

Program cost per family is approximately \$1,200 for 86 hours of service over 30 sessions spanning 2 years. The cost per school (without changing the job duties of existing staff) to serve 30 families is \$36,000 per year. Major funding sources for implementing the

FAST program include Title I of the Improving America's Schools Act, the Safe and Drug-Free Schools program, juvenile delinquency prevention funds, community development block grants, county and State family support funds, alcohol and drug prevention funds, child abuse prevention funds, departments of mental health, local community foundations, and United Way.

FAST Program Success

The success of the FAST program derives from its theory- and research-based approach. As a prevention and early intervention strategy for children ages 4 to 14, the program provides teacher identification of at-risk children through school-based screening. Through collaboration, schools, parents, and community agency professionals work as a nonhierarchical team to plan, carry out, and evaluate the local FAST program. Total family involvement is achieved when parents and siblings join with at-risk children at FAST sessions. Parents are supported and empowered as the primary prevention agents for their children through structured social activities while forming a strong network with other families. The FAST program has proven to be adaptable in varied settings. Rural, suburban, and inner-city schools serving diverse ethnic groups of children report experiencing ownership of their FAST programs, and FAST has been identified as one of six culturally competent education programs by the American Institute on Research (1998).

Assessments of Wisconsin parents and children conducted on completion of the FAST program and 6 months later showed statistically significant improvement in children's classroom and home behaviors, family closeness, and parental involvement in school, and a reduction in social isolation (McDonald and Sayger, 1998). Increased family friendships, community involvement, and parental self-sufficiency were documented in followup studies 2 to 4 years after program completion, suggesting that changes in the families' systems endured (McDonald et al., 1997). In California, statewide outcome data on 442 families in 12 cities showed reduced conduct disorder that predicts the likelihood of FAST youth getting in trouble later in life.

Ten years after the first FAST groups were initiated at Family Service of Madison, WI, the FAST program is being implemented

in more than 450 schools in 31 States and 5 countries. The program has been replicated systematically by certified FAST team trainers statewide in Wisconsin (1990–present) and California (1995–present) and nationwide through Family Service America, an international nonprofit organization of family counseling agencies. In 1998, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) funded Communities in Schools to expand the dissemination of FAST (McDonald, 1998). FAST International, founded in 1997, conducts training and evaluation in Canada, Australia, Germany, and Austria.

The FAST program has received numerous national honors and awards, including recognition by the White House, the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, OJJDP, the Office of National Drug Control Policy, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, the Harvard University/Ford Foundation Innovations in State Government program, United Way of America, and Family Resource Coalition. FAST was the only family program featured at the White House Conference on School Safety in October 1998.

For Further Information

OJJDP will be publishing a Bulletin providing further detailed information on the FAST program. To obtain a copy, contact the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (JJC), 800–638–8736. For additional information about the FAST program, contact Lynn McDonald, The FAST Project, Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin at Madison, 608–263–9476 (telephone), 608–263–6448 (fax), mrmcdona@facstaff.wisc.edu (e-mail). For information on FAST team training and replication, contact the FAST National Training and Evaluation Center at Edgewood College, 800–444–4861. For a list of sources cited in this Fact Sheet, call JJC. This list also is available as an addendum through Fax-on-Demand at the JJC toll-free number and from OJJDP's Web page, www.ncjrs.org/ojjhome.htm.

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