ABSTRACT

EFFECTIVENESS OF “BUILDING A BETTER ME” AFTER-SCHOOL ENRICHMENT PROGRAM FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS

By Deborah A. Vogt

This thesis evaluates the effectiveness of the “Building A Better Me” Program. The program was developed from a family systems theory perspective and focuses on various issues pertaining to communication. Using this theoretical base, the “Building A Better Me” Program is designed for implementation with children six to ten years of age, in an after-school setting and includes lessons that provide opportunity to build positive communication; conflict resolution and problem solving skills; recognition and expression of feelings along with increased positive self-esteem; and relationship building activities. Lessons allow facilitators to stress the influences that good self-esteem and relationships have on modes of communication as they are an important part of a child’s social and emotional competence and play a key role in development throughout his/her adolescent years. Evaluation of the “Building a Better Me” Program resulted in data supporting the effectiveness of such a program in an after school setting.
EFFECTIVENESS OF “BUILDING A BETTER ME”
AFTER-SCHOOL ENRICHMENT PROGRAM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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Dedication

Devotion of thanks goes to my husband, Todd, and son, PFC Kevin Fletcher USMC. Without your continued support and encouragement throughout the years of my college career this thesis could not have been successfully completed. You are true examples of what family can be when individuals respect and love each other, work together as a united team, and support individual dreams that affect the family unit. Thanks for all of the rides to Oxford and take-out meals. I love you both more than words can tell.
Introduction

Transactional processes such as communication and conflict resolution are examples of systems theory principles highlighting how interdependence of individuals affects well-being of the family as a unit. Systems theory considers that systems consist of smaller subsystems and are imbedded in larger systems called suprasystems. When the family group is the defined system, systems theory can be used to understand intrafamily processes—such as family functioning, family communication and transactional patterns, family conflict, separateness and connectedness among members, cohesion, integration, and adaptation to change—through the transactions among family members. Extent of transactional sequencing of the family is of particular interest as repetition and redundancy create a pattern. Therefore, family processes can be understood as the product of the entire system, shifting the primary focus away from the individual members to relationships among the members of the family system (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993).

The McMaster Model family assessment device is based on systems theory and holds five assumptions: (a) all parts of the family are interrelated; (b) one part of the family cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of the family system; (c) family functioning cannot be fully understood by simply understanding each of the individual family members or subgroups; (d) a family’s structure and organization are important factors that strongly influence and determine the behavior of family members; and (e) the transactional patterns of the family system strongly shape the behavior of family members (Miller, Ryan, Gabor, Bishop, & Epstein, 2000).

Patterson (1999) defined a family system as two or more individuals (family structure) and the patterns of relationship between them (family functioning). Family structure reflects diverse family forms as well as cultural and ethnic viability. Family functioning is a multidimensional process characterizing the unit as a whole, such as cohesiveness, flexibility, affective and instrumental communication, and behavioral control (Patterson, 2002). Communication is an important component of family functioning.

Communication between humans involves more than simply the exchange of information in the sense of either literal content or information theory. Humans act not only upon information,
but upon the social reality they construct (Whitechurch & Constantine, 1993). Communication efforts within the family are influenced by the experiences that parents and children have as they interact as active agents in society. Dynamics of each situation and personal relationship mold mannerisms of interaction and are determinants of “real” communication versus only superficial discussion of issues (McAdoo, 2001). When examining communication within the family, professionals must keep in mind the context of the relationship, whether the dialogue is only within the family, whether the family is of color, issues of power within relationships, and if communication is within or across ethnic groups (McAdoo, 2001). Families of color may function under cultural norms that professionals need to recognize.

Understanding family communication patterns is important for two reasons. The first reason being that more recent definitions view the family as a transactional unit using communication to establish levels of interdependence and commitment, forming ties of loyalty and identity, and transmitting a sense of family identity, history and future. Second, using a model of family communication based on a general theory of relational schema, the scientific study of communication requires knowledge of how meaning is assigned to messages, as well as how people influence each other (Fitzpatrick, 2004). Thus, as family life educators develop programs to enhance communication skills, emphasis can be placed on the meaning of communication in both literal senses as well as functional.

Family life education professionals (FLEd) must be mindful of the strengths that families from different cultural groups bring to programs. Hildreth and Sugawara (1993) suggest that when designing and implementing multicultural family life education programs, three elements are to be considered: (a) an educator’s sensitivity to and knowledge of cultural diversity; (b) selection of appropriate curriculum activities, teaching procedures, and instructional materials; and (c) knowledge of available human resources (Gudykunst & Lee, 2001). Additionally, programs should be theoretically and empirically sound (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004; Hennon & Arcus, 1993). Therefore, after-school programs should be designed to provide children opportunities that are based on developmentally appropriate practices in regards to age, developmental level, culture, and promotion of self-help skills.

Collaborations among school professionals, as well as other community resources play an important part in developing after school programs. These programs allow the family life education professional to emphasize the development of self-concept in minority children using
examples in a positive manner as opposed to acting on biases and expecting children to share information simply because they are of a specific culture or ethnic background.

Poor communication skills can negatively influence interactions between family members when messages are not accurately conveyed. Ineffective listening skills also contribute to miscommunication that can weaken the family unit. Poor communication may also be a result of lack of understanding or misunderstanding of feelings; paradigm (a set way of interpreting or viewing the world); as well as family of origin (which influence the cognitive domain of children influencing the mindset that they as adults then display in their parenting style). The “Building A Better Me” Program provides students with activities that will allow them to work in groups and begin to accept other children for the uniqueness they bring to the group. Children will develop an understanding of what “cooperation” and “respect” mean. Lessons also aid children in developing good listening skills, experience of giving and receiving positive reciprocal communication and increase understanding that perspective influences communication. Group activities will allow children to work in a team effort to minimize stressors that hinder communication.

“Building a Better Me” is created twofold to meet the needs of students as well as parents. While students will participate in activities offered as enhancement through an after-school program, parents will receive handouts, activities to complete such as a quiz, and verbal information regarding the topics during the same period their children are engaged in the topic activity. As children are given opportunity to experience activities and practice skills, family members can begin to experience more positive communicate; improved self-esteem and self-concept through recognizing self importance as well as feelings and emotions; and relationships building by providing knowledge learned through handouts and written materials.

Literature Review

Communication in Families

Family communication is the patterns of communication that a family uses to facilitate arriving at shared expectations about cohesiveness and flexibility (adaptability) as well as a basis for accomplishing family functions (Patterson, 2002). In well functioning families, there is a high
degree of satisfaction about the way in which personal needs and interests are satisfied. Well-functioning families are also characterized by family members who are satisfied to a large degree with the family’s cohesion and adaptability. Subjective satisfaction with specific domains of life, such as family, determines one’s quality of life.

Effective communication is determined to be, in terms of marital characteristics, the most important aspect of well-functioning families. Communication includes free flow of information between the couple in which convictions and feelings are shared. Low-context communication involves exchange of messages where the majority of information necessary to determine meaning is embedded in the explicit message. High-context communication involves exchange of messages where the majority of information necessary to determine meaning is in the context or internalized in members of the culture (Gudykunst & Lee, 2001). While both low-context and high-context communication can work for families depending upon family dynamics, it appears that high-context communication would better support levels of cohesion, adaptability, and satisfaction that well-functioning family’s experience. Giblin (1996) noted that one of the clearest links between family strengths occurs between spending time together and direct-open-two-way communication.

Lewis (1998) noted that relationships can be altered by changing the way people talk to each other. Lewis also concluded that the characteristics of mutual respect, power sharing, and open expression of affect contribute to high levels of connectedness and separateness and the containment of conflict, which are important characteristics for successful partnerships (Wilhelm, Brownhill, & Boyce, 2000). With further exploration of the connection among commitment, communication, and the collectivity of the family, professionals will be able to provide documentation to better comment on communication in personal and family relationships (Akister, Meekings, & Stevenson-Hinde, 1993). Rogers (2001) noted that few studies have been conducted on family communication as a whole. More comprehensive studies are beginning to receive increased attention as an integrated, multilevel view of the interrelationships of the different subsystems within the family.

*Communication Regarding Adolescents*

Effective communication is generally regarded as a central feature of good family functioning, particularly so as children reach adolescence and begin to establish a clearer sense of their own
that good parent-adolescent communication facilitates adaptability and flexibility in solving identities and ability to make decisions for them. Olsen and colleagues pointed to the fact problems within the family (Jackson, Bijstra, Oostra, & Bosma, 1998). Vangelisti (1992) concluded that parent-adolescent relationships involve renegotiation of roles and norms; therefore adolescents’ perceptions of their communication problems with parents are likely to reflect some of the issues being negotiated. Also, adolescents’ comparisons, or generalizations, of their own parental communication problems with those of peers may be more important in determining the association of current problems to relational satisfaction.

A number of studies have shown positive relationships between family functioning (parental support or nurturance and communication) and adolescents’ self-esteem, and between family functioning and problematic behaviors in adolescents. As families display a higher level of functioning, such as adaptability and communication, negative behaviors in adolescents can diminish as children and parents work through difficult issues. Some studies support the importance of family patterns in the development of social relationships outside of the family (Marta, 1997). In this regard, patterns of reciprocal communication indicate equivalent or shared patterns of dominance. However, unequal patterns of dominance are associated with the dominant member reporting feelings of being understood, yet having lower levels of understanding their partner’s view of the situation (Rogers, 2001).

As parents and children strive to better understand and communicate with each other, levels of dominance can be lowered. It is also important that effective communication take place between family members, especially between parents and children, to reduce patterns of dominance that the adolescent may model in relationships outside the family. Skills such as “I” messages and positive communication are an important part of a child’s social and emotional competence and play a key role in development throughout his/her adolescent years. Introducing opportunity to learn skills such as usage of “I” messages through the “Building A Better Me” program, which focuses on school-age children ages six through ten, can help children to build a foundation for better communication prior to entering the adolescent period.

**Conflict Resolution / Problem Solving**

Problem solving is the family’s ability to resolve problems at a level that maintains effective family functioning, as defined by each specific family. Problems are of two conceptual types: instrumental and affective. Instrumental tasks or problems include the mechanics of everyday
life such as money management. Affective tasks or problems relate to the feelings and emotional experiences of each family member (Miller, Ryan, Keitner, & Bishop, 2000).

The need for awareness of and ability to call on family strengths to solve problems is heightened during times of transition and stress. Families do not react passively to stress but implement behavioral and cognitive strategies to survive. Communication is thus a vital aspect of how families develop strategies and how well they cope with stress. Stressful events, developmental transitions (such as children moving into the preteen period) and intrafamily tensions all affect family functioning. While families are aware of the stresses they face, knowing how to deal more effectively with those stressors is of major importance (Giblin, 1996). Communication for good problem solving at these times is important. Miller et al. (2000) defined problem-solving as the family’s ability to resolve problems at a level that maintains effective family functioning.

Theoretical Foundation and Program Aspects

Suprasystemic research findings in general show that when social programs are approached as family suprasystems, interventions and preventions are more effective and appropriate for the various populations they target (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Family interventions include relationship enhancement, which recognizes the need for people to be validated and understood in intimate relationships, whether they be marital relationships, parent-child relationships, couples who are seeking treatment, or those taking advantage of educationally based prevention programs (Dickson & Markman, 1993; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993).

Understanding the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships includes (a) understanding self and others; (b) interpersonal communication skills, such as listening, empathy, self-disclosure, decision making, problem solving, and conflict-resolution; and (c) relating to others with concern, respect, sincerity, and responsibility (Olsen & Olsen, 2003).

Communication

The authors of the Guiding Self-Ideal Questionnaire contend that being in an effective relationship involves a combination of (a) knowledge about the relationship, including behavioral issues; (b) skills such as listening, responding, making “I” statements, encouraging, and refraining; and (c) an understanding of both self and partner (Eckstein & Shapiro, 2004).

For families with one member experiencing the transition from adolescence to adulthood, adequacy in communication—with the possibility of being able to freely express opinions and
feelings—become an important element in stress mediation (Marta, 1997). Jackson, Bijstra, Oostra, and Bosma (1998) concluded in their study of 431 adolescents that younger adolescents reported more positive open communication with mother and father than older adolescents did. With these findings (Jackson et al., 1998; Marta, 1997), the development of positive communication skills and relationship building techniques in the school-age years should provide a basis for expressing ideas and feelings as children mature.

Self-Expression

Marshall and associates (1997) reported that children of low-income in grades 1 through 4 who attended after-school programs displayed fewer internalizing problems, according to their mothers, than children who did not attend programs (NICHD, 2004). “Unrecognized” thoughts and feelings color and potentially shape behavior and development. Many children succeed in negotiating both internal and external demands through order, stimulation, and opportunities provided by family, school, and community. However for those children who do not receive appropriate instructional support, a variety of negative outcomes may surface including anger, depression, self-criticism, hostility, indifference, and defiance (Marans & Cohen, 1999).

Professionals and helping adults must help children and adolescents to become more aware of feelings, identify and name feelings, associate specific feelings with specific beliefs and attitudes, and monitor changes in feelings, beliefs, and attitudes. It is not enough for adolescents to talk about what they think or believe. They must be encouraged to think about how they feel about others who are different. Gardner’s (1995) notion of “intra-personal intelligence” emphasizes adolescents’ being in touch with their emotions and expanding their range of tolerance (Haynes & Marans, 1999). Emotional awareness can be emphasized and nurtured through (a) small group counseling and discussion; (b) one-to-one counseling and guidance sessions; (c) dramatization and role play; and (d) poetry and other creative forms of expression (Haynes et al., 1999).
Self-Esteem / Concept

Empirical data indicate that children have lower self-concepts and an increased fear of success during early adolescence (Ford, 1992). Consequently, interactions with adults who serve as positive role models, as well as opportunities to succeed are highly relevant to promoting self-concept. Self-concept represents a person’s relatively stable appraisal of personal strengths and weaknesses that is largely based on his/her history of success or disappointment in inter-personal interactions. This self-appraisal influences expectations and future behaviors in interaction with others (Cornell, Pelton, Bassin, Landrum, & Ramsay, 1990). Brooks (1999) elicited that the role of low self-esteem contributes to a lack of hope and images of continued failure for the future.

Children construct cognitive representations and expectations of relationships through their early experiences with primary caregivers. These experience-based expectations, or working models, are believed to be incorporated into the personality structure and to influence the behavior in interpersonal relationships throughout and beyond childhood (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1988; Rhodes et al., 2000). Adolescents who developed emotional bonds with their adults gradually begin to experience more positive, trusting interactions with their parents and peers (Rhodes et al., 2000).

Vangelisti’s study (1992) resulted in findings that adolescent communication problems with their parent’s emphasized issues related to the dialectic tension between individuality and connectedness. Therefore, a strong sense of self and positive self-esteem can contribute to positive communication and relationship building skills. Establishing a strong sense of self along with positive self-esteem in pre-adolescent years can be essential in maintaining positive communication and relationship building skills within the family as children reach adolescence and begin to experience relationships in a variety of subsystems.

Conflict Resolution / Relationship Building

All conflicts are rooted in some kind of communication problem that includes misunderstanding, inability to communicate, or aggressive communication. Conflict resolution involves communication to address the problems giving rise to conflict. Conflict resolution requires family members to (a) tell what the problem is; (b) find as many different solutions as possible; (c) decide which solutions are good; and (d) choose one solution to act upon (Patti & Latieri, 1999). Therefore, communicating to resolve conflict includes observing accurately, speaking clearly, listening reflectively, and responding appropriately (Kreidler & Furlong, 1995).
After-School / Enrichment Programs

As children transition into adolescence, they begin to navigate between available resources and their own interests. As many young people make decisions independently of family, their goals embrace behaviors that signal successful adulthood (Roy & McDermid, 2003). When children become involved in relationships outside of the family, they become part of multiple subsystems. While these subsystems consist of specific groups of people, the interactions displayed in each subgroup influence the social actions and learning that children carry from group to group.

After-school programs are supportive of the social dimensions of children’s learning. Of all formal institutions, after-school programs can most afford to be non-utilitarian about childhood, responding to children’s individuality, creating interest and manipulating material environments to provide opportunities for children to “seek out and experience for one’s own sake” (Halpin, 2003, p.116). After-school programs can aid in creating an alliance between adults, children, and adolescents as adults play a supportive role, rather than directive and judgmental.

Through supportive, caring relationships, many children become more secure and/or responsive in relationships with other adults such as teachers and parents. After-school programs can also foster family communication and enhance family strengths as children are given opportunities to work with peers in group efforts, which help build upon Barnhill’s (1979) dimensions of healthy family functioning such a connectedness, mutuality, and clear communications.

Evaluations of volunteer mentoring programs, as a component of after school programs, provide evidence of positive influences on adolescent developmental outcomes, including improvements in academic achievement, self-concept, and reduction in substance abuse (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). Community interest in after-school programs is growing due to four public beliefs: (a) public streets and playgrounds are no longer safe for children; (b) it is stressful and unproductive for children to be left on their own during after-school hours; (c) many children need additional time and individual attention for academic work beyond what the school can provide; and (d) economically disadvantaged children need opportunities for developmentally enriching activities (Zhang, Smith, & Lam, 2002).

After-school programs are a benefit to parents as they can choose to work during after-
school hours with a sense of security and well-being regarding the care that their children are receiving. According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research (2004), more than 60% of families with children ages 5 to 14 years have mothers who are in the workforce, thus the potential for after school programs is apparent in a changing society in which traditional family structure is becoming minority.

Program Development and Content

Based upon family systems theory principles (especially the importance of good communication) and grounded on a family strengths model, the “Building a Better Me” (BABM) program is designed for school-age children in an after-school setting. Lessons have also been designed to fit into a school day curriculum, if desired. The McMaster’s Model of family assessment indicates that all parts of the family are interrelated; and the transactional patterns of the family system shape the behavior of family members. With this in mind, it is comprehensible that as children interact in other social settings, such as after-school programs, the experiences they encounter will influence interactions that take place in the family unit as family interaction influences suprasystems interactions. This section reviews the “Building a Better Me” Program that consists of four units:

- Enhancing Positive Communication Skills
- Emotional Awareness
- Self-Awareness
- Building Relationships

All lessons are literacy-based and include activities that support book content. “Building a Better Me” is in Appendix A. Referrals to specific aspects of the program will be noted throughout this section. BABM is designed to meet the basic needs of families regardless of culture, race and family structure. Activities involve all children regardless of age, gender, culture, socio-economic status, or family type. Ideally, the program will encompass children between six and ten years of age and in need of after school childcare. Facilitator of the BABM program is a staff member of the current after-school program. Lessons for children are provided through facilitator interaction in the form of daily activities, such as board games, art projects, and team building experiences. As children are provided specific activities through BABM, recognition of
feelings, healthy self-esteem, positive communication, constructive relationship building, and children’s ability to express themselves are enhanced. Positive communication increases as children begin to recognize their feelings and provide rationale for them. By voicing feelings in a constructive manner, children start using communication as a means of emotional outlet.

Each unit has three lessons designed to meet the specific goals of the unit (see Appendix A), with activities lasting from 45 minutes to two hours. Units are designed to be completed in a week with total program completion in a month. The lessons contain activities and information that may be flexibly scheduled for maximum use, keeping in mind that not all children may be present on a daily basis in some after-school programs.

Unit One of BABM consists of three lessons that focus on developing good listening skills; how perspective influences communication; and positive verbal communication. Lesson One gives children the opportunity to engage in the “Telephone Game” as they can begin to comprehend the importance of the act of listening as part of communication. Through use of active listening skills, individuals can ask questions for clarification and seek to understand the actual meaning of messages.

Lesson Two provides children with an activity, “My Side of the Room *”, allowing them to view key participants and their actions from a specific viewpoint. During this activity, children note their observations and share in open communication their perspective of what occurred. Emphasis is placed on there being no right or wrong answers, simply collective communication of opinions and thoughts as to what occurred.

Lesson Three allows children to experience the importance of using manners and being respectful to others. It is also an introduction to the use of “I” messages and active listening, which help to establish skills children can use to communicate more clearly.

Unit Two of BABM provides three lessons in which children are able to recognize how they feel and name and give examples of emotions. They learn to voice feelings in a constructive manner and realize that it is normal to question their feelings as they continue to change, learn, and grow as they create a picture into the future titled, “What I Want to Be When I Grow Up.” BABM provides children with opportunity for small group discussion; one-on-one interaction with facilitators throughout lessons; role play through various group activities; as well as creative forms of expression through use of “free-style painting” and clay or play-doh activities.

1 Denotes activities originally designed by the author.
Free-style painting in Lesson One allows children to express emotions through creation as they associate feelings with outward expression of their creations. Use of clay and Play-Doh in Lesson Two provides children with an opportunity to manipulate the medium as a means of emotional outlet, while also providing a way for creativity. Lesson Three gives children opportunity to realize that it is normal to question their feelings as they continue to change, learn, and grow. This lesson allows children to reflect on how they looked and acted when they were younger, while offering activity to be creative in constructing a picture of who they would like to be when they grow up.

Unit Three of BABM provides children with activities that enable them to recognize and gain understanding of their own likes and dislikes. Children complete a quiz to determine their temperament and discuss why they chose specific answers.

As children become aware of their individual differences and identify quality characteristics of self, they can become more comfortable with whom they are. As individuals become more in tuned with their feelings, they can begin to voice themselves more positively. Increasing understanding and establishing meaning for the emotions and feelings will allow members to build relationships and support the needs of each other.

To aid in a more concise understanding of self through self-awareness, parents as well as children will complete a temperament quiz and discuss results while children are engaged in Lesson One. An awareness of individual differences can aid parents in understanding why their children perform certain tasks as they do, or why children have specific attitudes about situations. The awareness will give parents a basis for communicating in effective manners to meet the specific needs of their children. Parents will also be encouraged to reflect on their own results of the temperament quiz and how their temperament affects their parenting, attitudes, and relationships. Comprehension that personal growth is sustained as people continue to learn and grow is essential for both parents and children; personal growth is a goal of this program.

BABM provides children with activities enabling them to become aware of individual differences and proudly present them as they create a “Self Book*” in Lesson Two. The “Self Book” consists of pages and pictures of which children create an individual compilation of their favorite food, clothes, games, etc. Self-awareness is also a basis for building positive self-esteem and/or concept in Lesson Three as children identify quality characteristics of self. While
recognizing similarities and differences of classmates, an understanding and appreciation of self can also take place.

In **Unit Four**, children work in groups to complete projects in a team effort. In Lessons One and Two children are able to experience the importance of cooperation and respect, as well as an appreciation for the uniqueness that peers bring to the group and/or project. **Lesson One** allows children to create a wall mural for which they must resolve issues such as subject of the mural, and who will create specific parts of the picture. **Lesson Two** includes “Getting the Job Done*”, a game designed to have children bring individual ideas to the project and work together to incorporate all ideas into a group project. **Lesson Three** encourages children to begin to view friends as a support system through the “Fill My Cup” game. During this activity, children gain a greater sense of self worth as peers use positive communication to voice positive comments about individuals in the group. Children can also experience a sense of accomplishment by helping their friends to feel good about themselves.

As verification of friends as a support system through recognition of each member’s importance occurs, individuals gain a sense of belonging to the unit. The concept of building relationships is recognized as children are provided opportunity to work in groups and complete small projects. Relationships are strengthened as individuals begin to build trust among peers and gain an understanding of cooperation and respect through practicing conflict resolution strategies.

**Method**

**Participants**

Sample $N$ consisted of 17 completed pre and post questionnaires. Original sample $N$ consisted of 28 completed questionnaires, while only 17 of the same participants were present to complete the post questionnaire due to variance in attendance schedules in after school program. Children ranged 6 to 10 years of age. Males made up approximately 2/3 of the sample population. All children were enrolled in grades first through fourth at the school location where the BABM program was implemented, and attended the after-school program with varying schedules, approximately 3 out of five days per week. Participants were of middle-class socioeconomic status with a variety of family structures. One of the 28 children completing pre and post questionnaires was African American. The other 27 children were Caucasian. The 17 participants completing both pre and post questionnaires were Caucasian with approximately 2/3
of the children being male; and 2/3 of the children enrolled in first and second grade. The number of children completing post questionnaire was smaller due to participation in other various outside activities occurring at the same time that BABM program was being implemented. A greater number of program participants in grade three and four were involved, compared to children in first and second grades, in other activities being offered during the same time as BABM.

**Procedures**

Evaluation of BABM occurred as participants completed pre and post questionnaires regarding the topics of communication; emotional awareness; self-awareness; and relationships and team building skills. Parents of possible participants were given a letter explaining the BABM program along with a written consent form giving permission for their child to participate. Parents signed a consent form permitting children to fill out the questionnaire. (See Appendix A for forms and instrument). BABM program was then introduced to the participants and children volunteering to participate were given written consent forms. Verbal consent was also initiated by the facilitator. To enhance reliability participants were grouped for post questionnaire as they were for pre questionnaire; grades 1 and 2 together; and grades 3 and 4 together. Grades 1 and 2 were assisted in reading words they could not pronounce or understand. The post questionnaire was administered approximately four weeks after pre questionnaire and upon completion of program implementation.

Participants were asked to complete the pre questionnaire prior to implementation of the BABM program, by circling a number 1 through 5, that best related to their agreement with each statement. This information was recorded as pre program data. Post questionnaire information was collected in the same manner upon completion of the program implementation, and recorded as post data. Participants noted the month, day, and year on each questionnaire to determine dates between both pre and post data collection. Participants also listed first and last initial of their names. Pre questionnaires were randomly numerically ordered. Post questionnaire were also numerically ordered based upon matching participant initials as a means of measuring pre and post data for each participant. All information was kept confidential in a location other than that of the after-school program.
Measures

The BABM questionnaire was designed to measure the expected outcomes for children ages 6 to 10 who participated in the program during the four week implementation period as children complete their answers in written form. Statements for the questionnaire were written based upon the program goals and objectives along with expected outcomes. Each item composing the four intended scales was subjected to matching with lesson objectives that were written in measurable behavioral terms. This questionnaire consisted of 28 statements; 14 statements phrased both positively and negatively to obtain date reflective of increased positive behaviors and/or knowledge; as well as to measure decreased negative behaviors and/or knowledge. Pre and post questionnaires for children included answers rated on a Likert scale with 1 representing “Completely Disagree” and 5 representing “Completely Agree.” Negatively worded statements were recoded upon data entry to maintain consistency in scoring of statement answers with 5 representing “Completely Disagree” and 1 representing “Completely Agree.”

Questions involving the communication component of the BABM program consisted of a total of ten statements. Questions consisted of both positively and negatively worded statements such as “I always listen to people when they talk to me.”, and “I rarely listen to people when they talk to me.” The emotional awareness component of the BABM program consisted of four statements; two positively worded and two negatively worded. Statements included items such as, “I know why I feel happy, angry, or sad.”, and “I don’t know why I feel happy, angry, or sad.” The self-awareness component of the BABM program consisted of a total of seven statements with four positively worded and three negatively worded. Statements representing this component consisted of items such as, “I know what I want to be when I grow up.” and “I do not know what I want to be when I grow up.”; and “I am comfortable telling people how I feel.”, along with the statement “I am not comfortable telling people how I feel.” The relationship building component of BABM program consists of four statements with positive and negative versions of “I know / don’t know how to resolve conflicts” and “I like / don’t like to work with people to complete group projects.”

Validity of all scales was assessed through “face” and “expert” methods. After this face validity process, the items were reviewed by four experts in the areas of program development,
building family strengths, and child development. Comments by the experts were incorporated into the development of the final scale items. The results of the pretest were subjected to factor analysis.

After the data were collected (pre and post program), the items were subjected to reliability analysis. Initial reliability of expected scales indicated low Cronbach’s alpha coefficients. It also appeared that the participants had trouble answering the negatively word items on the pre and post questionnaires. A series of factor analyses were conducted, reliability coefficients recalculated, items eliminated, and so on using only the data collected from the 17 participants that completed the pre and post questionnaires. The series means were inserted for missing data. This procedure lead to the inclusion of only positively worded items from the questionnaire, and the elimination of items that did not load on factors (eigenvalues over 1, factor loading values of at least .4, with varimax rotation and principal components analysis). Three factors were identified.

Factor one, Emotional Awareness, is composted of items 3, 7, and 24 (see APPENDIX A). The possible range of score is 3–15. The Cronbach’s alpha is .7838. Factor two, Communication, is composted of items 5, 8, and 28. The possible range of score is 3–15. Cronbach’s alpha is .7069. Factor three, Self-Awareness, is composted of items 10 and 23. The possible range of score is 2–10. Cronbach’s alpha is .6752.

Results

The evaluation of the program was conducted using the pre and post mean scores of the three factors identified. The results of the paired-sample t-tests (2-tailed) are shown in Table 1. One comparison indicated a statistically significant increase in the mean score between the pre and post administrations of the questionnaire. This factor is Communication that indicates an increase in the direction of desired change in measurable outcomes including verbal communication skills. The pre program mean was 10.87 while the post program mean was 12.88. The other two comparisons of means, while showing an increase in a positive direction, did not reach statistical significance.
Table 1: Results of pre and post questionnaire t-test scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Pre-mean</th>
<th>Post-mean</th>
<th>t value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Awareness</td>
<td>10.24</td>
<td>10.93</td>
<td>.856</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>10.87</td>
<td>12.88</td>
<td>2.458</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Awareness</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>.789</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.442</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Limitations

Limitations of the evaluation process may include sample size, frequency in attendance of participants due to variable schedules in the after school program, and several participants were involved in sports and musical events during the same time period that the BABM program was conducted. Changes in knowledge and/or behavior could have occurred due to other events rather than the BABM program. Other limitations could include facilitator bias during presentation of the program and/or during group interaction while gathering questionnaire data, as well as clarity of statements in the questionnaires. It is also possible that children this age have trouble completing the questionnaires used for program evaluation. For example, some children answered “completely agree” to polar opposite stated items such as “I don’t know how to resolve conflicts,” and “I know how to resolve conflicts.” The range of cognitive abilities among children participating in the program could be a factor in both how children understood the statements and answered to them.

Evaluation

Development of BABM program was based on Family Life Education methodology using developmentally appropriate practices for children ages 6 through 10 years of age with a variety of learning styles considered in development of activities. Program process evaluation included considerations in regards to environment in which program was to be implemented, number of participants, and participation attendance. The BABM program was implemented on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of each week in efforts to meet maximum attendance numbers of participants. Success of implementation includes the flexibility of use of program activities out of sequence while still within the program unit week.

Initial and intermediate outcomes of the BABM program included child behavioral change through visual observations of both facilitator and permanent on-site personnel. During free-play
time and remainder of after-school program sessions, children continued to use lesson topics in regards to communicating with peers, as well as use of self-awareness skills during play interactions.

Considerations

Future considerations for implementing the BABM program include revision of data collection tool. Questionnaire statements could be simplified to meet cognitive abilities of a greater number of participants. Also, closer look could be given to actual wording of statements in regards to actual measurement of behavior versus gained knowledge. Future success in use of the BABM program could include incentive for children to participate in all three activities each of the four weeks, as well as additional feedback from parents and teachers as to how they observed possible changes in behavior due to exposure to the BABM program.

Torppa, Kirby Wilkins and Parrott (2006) suggest that training in communication and social skills are central to after school programs as in their pilot study conducted during the 2005-2006 school year. Results of the pilot study conclude that children partaking in the measured after school program had significant improvements in conflict management and communication. Results were based upon parental perceptions of their children’s social and relational skills, including emotion regulation, peer entry (ability to enter into play situations), communication of interest and liking, and conflict management.

Conclusion and Implications

While research supports the use of enrichment programs in after school programs, additional research in family related items such as family functioning and structure could be conducted to further enhance implementation BABM program.

Generalizations conclude that exposure to positive experiences for children in areas of communication, emotional awareness, self-awareness, and relationship building can enhance knowledge and attainment of specific skills needed to better communicate. With a greater number of families looking to after school programs for childcare, use of programs such as BABM in after school programs will provide children with resources needed to not only transition from childhood to adolescence, but also allow for development of social and emotional competency skills useful in the number of subsystems that children become a part of.
Implications for families include introduction to and/or influence of new and enhanced skills from children gained by BABM program participation. “First-order” change may occur in actual program participants through individual modification of behaviors, however as children comprise a number of subsystems within the family unit, intrafamily process such as communication take place. Through mutual influence and transactional processes from one family member to another, new or enhanced skills learned by children in after school programs influence other family members.
References:


Appendix A

Sample Parent Letter ................................................................. 24-25
Sample Parent Consent Form ...................................................... 26
Sample Child Consent Form ......................................................... 27
BABM Questionnaire .................................................................. 28-29
Dear Parent, March 8, 2006

You and your child are invited to participate in a program offered during your child’s stay at West Latchkey during the PM session.

My name is Debbie Vogt and as District Latchkey Coordinator for Fairfield City Schools, I have the opportunity to offer a program that I have designed as part of my thesis work for a Graduate degree in Family and Child Studies at Miami University. This work has been approved by both Miami University and Fairfield Schools.

The Building A Better Me Program is designed to build upon skills pre-existing as well as reinforce new skills learned in each lesson throughout the four week program. Each lesson is based on a story that introduces children to the topic on a level that they can understand. Activities are introduced and presented in a manner that allows each child to participate at his or her own comfort level. Three lessons are instructed per week, allowing children to participate on days of attendance.

As part of your child’s participation in the Building A Better Me Program, s/he will experience four weeks of activities developed to enhance communication skills, increase emotional awareness along with better understanding of feelings, increase self-awareness, and have opportunity for relationship building.

These skills are an important part of your child’s social and emotional competence and play a key role in development throughout his/her adolescent years.

Children will bring home projects each week relating to the topic of discussion and parents will receive handouts reinforcing information that children learn in Latchkey. Parent handouts will include a Temperament quiz, weekly newsletter, and suggestions for family activities that will allow parent and child to experience and practice new skills learned.

Building A Better Me consists of Four Units, each with three lessons, including:

**Unit 1) Enhancing Positive Communication Skills**
Communication skill activities presented to your child will include group games and activities that allow children to develop good listening skills, understand how perspectives influence communication, and practice of positive verbal communication.
(Unit 2) Emotional Awareness and Understanding Feelings
During this unit children be able to recognize and name their feelings and emotions, voice feelings in a constructive manner, identify means for emotional outlets, and realize that it is normal to question their feelings as they continue to learn, grow and change.

(Unit 3) Self-Awareness
Children will complete a Temperament quiz and discuss likes and dislikes. Activities allow children to become aware of their individual differences and become comfortable sharing them with peers. A greater understanding of self occurs as children identify quality characteristics of self while recognizing similarities and differences of peers.

(Unit 4) Building Relationships
Working in groups provides children with opportunity to build trust, develop an understanding of cooperation and respect for others, and recognize the importance of friends as a support system.

While lessons are presented independently of each other, communication, expression of thoughts and feelings, and cooperation and respect are reinforced throughout the duration of the Program. Children will be encouraged to reflect on past exercises presented from the Program and use skills focused on in previous lessons.

The overall intent of the Building A Better Me Program is to provide children with experiences allowing them to enhance skills that they will take with them and use in other areas of their life; and provide parents with information that helps them reinforce the learned skills for the variety of settings and situations that their child may experience.

You and your child will be asked to complete a short questionnaire before and after participating in the BABM Program which will be returned in sealed envelopes. Answers will remain private. Questionnaires will be coded for research purposes only to determine the effectiveness of BABM Program contents.

Should you or your child desire to terminate his/her participation in the BABM Program, simply reply either by telephone or in writing to contact information below.

Should you have questions or concerns regarding participation in the Building A Better Me Program, please feel free to contact me at (513) 868-1654 or vogt_d@fairfield-city.k12.oh.us.
Should you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Miami University Office of Advancement of Research and Scholarship at 529-3734.

Thank you for allowing your participation in the Building A Better Me Program.

District Latchkey Coordinator
Sample Parent Consent Form

Please complete the attached consent form and return in the attached envelope.

Thank you for allowing your participation in the Building A Better Me Program.

Giving children the experiences to learn is a major part of parenting and your agreement to allow your child to participate in the Building A Better Me Program reflects your interest in providing your child with positive opportunity to better him/herself.

Please complete the following information, sign, and return in the enclosed envelope.

My child _________________________________ has permission to participate in the Building A Better Me Program, offered through the WEST Latchkey Program at Fairfield City Schools. I understand that all activities will be conducted on site and my child’s participation is voluntary. He or she may decide to withdrawal from the Program at any time.

__________________________________________ _______________
Parent / Guardian SignatureDate
The Building A Better Me Program was explained to me and I understand how I will be able to participate in the activities. I also understand that I can decide to not participate in the BABM program at any time.

Student Name ____________________________________________

Date ________________________________________________
## “Building a Better Me” Program
### Questionnaire

**Today’s Date ___________________________**  
**First Initial ________ Last Initial ________**

Circle the number you think is best describes your answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Completely Disagree</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Completely Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I always listen to people when they talk to me:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I don’t always use positive words when I talk to people:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. It is okay for people to tell things the way they see them:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I don’t know how to resolve conflicts:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I use “I” messages when I talk to other people:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I don’t know why I feel happy, sad, or angry:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I have special ways that I express my emotions:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I know what I want to do or be when I grow up:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I’m not very comfortable telling people how I feel:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I know why I feel happy, angry, or sad:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I don’t know how to express my emotions:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I like to work with people to complete group projects:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I know how to resolve conflicts:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I use positive words when I talk to people:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I rarely listen to people when they talk to me:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Listening to people isn’t really important:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. It is not okay for people to tell things the way they see them:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Using manners is not important:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
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<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I use don’t “I” messages when I talk to other people:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I like to be myself even if different from my friends:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. I don’t know what I want to be or do when I grow up:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. I am comfortable telling people what I like and don’t like:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. It is okay for me to let other people know how I feel:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. I don’t like to be myself when different from my friends:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. I don’t like group projects:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. It is important to use manners:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Listening to other people is important:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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