

FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS TOGETHER FAST*

CASE STUDY

Middle School FAST is a peer group and multifamily group intervention designed to build protective factors for youth 10- to 14-years-old and empower parents to be the primary prevention agents for their own children. It is an award-winning program designed to prevent substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, school failure, abuse and neglect, and mental health problems.



Middle School FAST¹ in Action

Fighth-grader Angelina Gonzalez breezed into the house after school and told her father that she had been invited to serve as the youth representative on a team responsible for planning and implementing a program called Families and Schools Together (FAST). The team was to be composed of: a youth representative, a parent, a youth advocate, a school representative, a staff member from a local family service or mental health agency, and someone from a local drug abuse and prevention agency. With great pride, Angelina's father encouraged his daughter to take on this leadership role.

Angelina began working very closely with the school counselor, Ms. Goring, who had heard about FAST at a conference. Ms. Goring contacted the FAST National Training & Evaluation Center to find out what the school needed to do to become a certified FAST site. She learned that there were some clear requirements—for example, each site has to create its team in accordance with requirements specified by FAST National; the team has to be trained; and the site has to participate in the organization's evaluation process.

* FAST is affiliated with Alliance for Children and Families

¹ FAST has received numerous awards and honors and was designated as a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) model program in 2002.

Everything was going well until Ms. Goring realized that the team she was putting in place was not sufficiently representative of the families in the community. FAST National requires that “the whole team constellation reflect the culture of the families being served.” Fifty percent of the families in Angelina’s school were Mexican-American, but everyone who had been recommended for the team, other than Angelina, was White. Ms. Goring contested the rule with FAST National, making the case that her proposed team members were experienced with the school population. But FAST National wouldn’t budge. They said their rule guarantees cultural representation, rather than cultural competence, a stance that has contributed to the program’s success with diverse populations. It took a lot more time and energy, but Ms. Goring was able to put a diverse team together. She had to reach out to new partners, such as a family service agency that was working primarily with Latino families.

Now the project could finally move forward. Team members participated in a 2-day workshop designed to prepare them to implement FAST effectively. At the end of the two days, Angelina and her colleagues had become 6 equal and committed partners working together to make FAST a success.

The first item on the team’s agenda was to recruit youth for a 14-week series of peer group sessions. As a member of the school’s video club, Angelina immediately thought of making a commercial about FAST that might be shown on the TVs already in place in every classroom. In spite of some initial reservations, the other team members decided to fully support their youth representative’s idea. Angelina had no problem taking charge, and she got some of her peers from the video club to help. They acted out a thought-provoking 2-minute skit about FAST and recorded it. At the end of the commercial, students were told, “If you’re interested in learning more about the FAST program, come and see us today at three o’clock.” One hundred and fifty youth showed up!

Approximately 30 teens became regular members of the FAST Club. Participants were given leeway to design the Club to their liking as long as they were learning, having fun and bonding as a group. Once the peer group jelled, the teens were asked to bring their parents to a FAST



night. This was the first attempt to engage the families. It was important for the teens to decide whether they wanted their parents to be involved. Team members were available to make home visits to meet the parents face to face and invite them to the FAST program. To sweeten the deal, the team created an incentive—youth would get \$10 every night they brought their families to FAST.



Fourteen families signed up for the program. During the trainings the team had learned that FAST has an 80% program retention rate. If 14 families agreed to attend, then about 12 of them would actually show up, and 10 would graduate. Invitees got to define “family” for themselves—the only requirement was that at least one primary caregiver and the middle school youth needed to attend. Since many families have younger children, FAST has a standard component called Kids’ Time—a supervised session offering recreational and educational activities—to eliminate any childcare worries.

At long last the multifamily group was starting. Each member of the FAST team had a role to play in facilitating the 2 1/2-hour sessions. The first hour of the program is facilitated by the team. During the second hour, participants are divided into peer groups. Each session follows the same basic format for the 10 weeks of multi-family groups:

- Families are welcomed by the team, then go to their family table and eat a meal together. (On the first night, participants design a family flag.) Youth serve their parents during the meal time.
- At the end of the meal, the families greet each other with a “hello ritual” and sing songs. There is a FAST song with music composed by youth.
- Family members then split up and go in 3 different peer groups.

Middle school youth go to a youth peer group, and their goal is to select a topic that will be discussed during the one-on-one time with their parents. Once youth decide on a topic, the youth advocate takes the selected topic to the parents’ group

Their younger siblings attend Kids’ Time.

Meanwhile, parents and caregivers go to the parents’ time and for the first 15 minutes they are paired up for Buddy Time. They take turns sharing troubles of the day. One speaks for 7 minutes while the other listens and vice versa without any interruptions. After Buddy Time, the parents move on to a parents’ group.

- Next, each set of parents or caregivers spend 15 minutes of quality time with their youth.
- After one-on-one time, the families reunite to play a family connections game at their table.

- Then, there is a “fixed” lottery drawing, where each of the families gets to be a winner for a week. (The families are fully aware of the lottery format.) The winning family also receives cash or a gift card to prepare the meal for the following week.
- At the end of the session, the families create a closing circle, make announcements, and join in a concluding ritual.

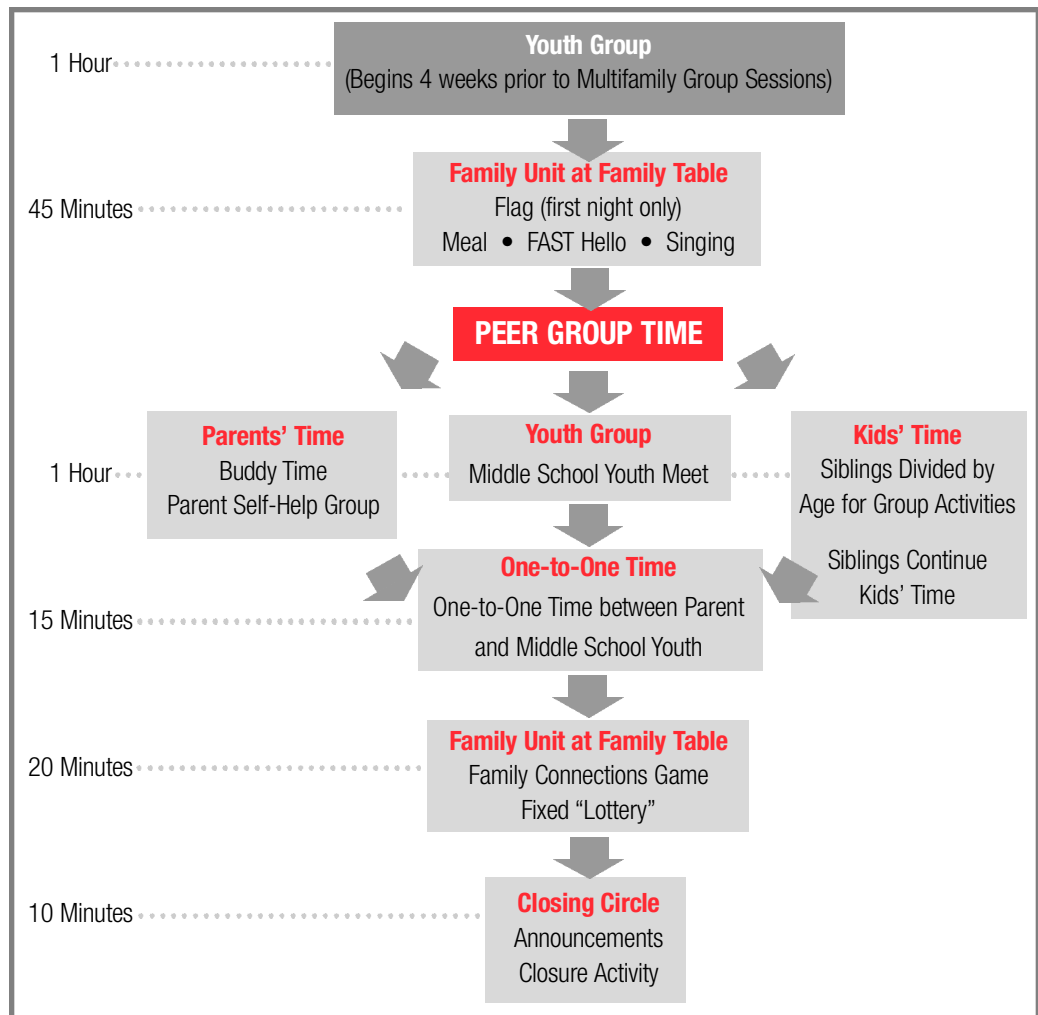
“ I used to think my father was mad at me when he came home from work tired or stressed out. I told him about it during one of our talks at FAST. Now he’s more likely to tell me what’s going on with him and I’m not as quick to think his bad mood is about me. ”

FASTTeen

“ What I really needed was someone to say, ‘You’re not a bad person. You’re just struggling right now.’ That happened at FAST. ”

FASTParent

Middle School FAST Session at-a-Glance



Key Components

FAST Club: The FAST Club is a 14-session peer group co-designed by the participants themselves and jointly facilitated by the FAST team's youth representative and an adult advocate. The program is molded to the young people's interests and needs, and focuses on helping them develop leadership skills. In order to maintain membership, both youth and their parents must agree to participate in the organization's multifamily groups. (It is during the second hour of those sessions that the FAST Club meets as an exclusive-membership group.)



MultiFamily Group: The multifamily group (5 to 14 families) meets in the evening for 10 sessions designed to promote a variety of relationships—between parents and their middle school youth, between couples raising children, between individual parents, between youth as a group, between parents as a group, between parents and the school, and between parents and the staff of community agencies. Each 2 1/2-hour session offers family members multiple opportunities to rehearse parent-youth communication in a positive environment.

FAST WORKS: Monthly, multifamily, self-help meetings provided to FAST graduates are held over the two years following the program. These sessions provide reinforcement of the skills family members have learned, and keep parents and caregivers connected to support networks.

What's unique about Middle School FAST?

Middle School FAST is planned and implemented through the innovative collaboration of youth, community professionals, school personnel, and parents. It is a genuine shared-governance model.

FAST is not just research-based; it is also grounded in a clear set of values. The program's philosophy stresses, for example, that activities do not create change, relationships do. In FAST, the interaction between parents and team members becomes the catalyst for recruitment and ongoing engagement.

FAST has a clear list of requirements to ensure program integrity in the replication process—40% of the program model is considered core, leaving a full 60% that may be adapted to meet local needs. The FAST National Training & Evaluation Center supports long-term sustainability of local



FAST programs. The Center provides training and technical assistance, as well as an evaluative quality assurance structure. The FAST team collects data from participants, using tools provided by FAST National; they submit the data; and within 6 weeks the site gets a full evaluation report, at a cost of only \$1,000. The report promotes self-monitoring so that local sites can determine what adjustments to make if they are not reaching their outcome goals.



Goals and Desired Outcomes

The main goals of the program are to:

- Prevent the FAST youth from experiencing school failure by improving members' performance and behavior in school, involving parents in the educational process, and increasing the family's feeling of positive affiliation with the school;
- Prevent substance abuse on the part of youth and other family members by increasing knowledge and awareness of substance abuse and its impact on child development, and by linking families to assessment and treatment services;
- Reduce stress experienced by children and their parents by developing an informal support system among parents and caregivers, and by linking families to community resources;
- Enhance family functioning by strengthening the parent-child relationship and empowering parents as primary prevention agents for their own children.

The Research Design

Two strategies have been used to evaluate FAST: (1) large multi-site studies with rigorous experimental designs and (2) pre and post program outcome evaluations at every new site.

Experimental Designs: Four different—separately funded—research designs administered by three groups of independent researchers were used to rigorously evaluate FAST. Each study randomized the families into FAST vs. control (or comparison) groups and each tested a different hypothesis, using separate measures. The Gresham and Elliot Social Skills Rating Scale (SSRS) and the Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) were used across all four studies, and measured child functioning as assessed by parents and teachers. These evaluations tested the following program outcomes goals: family support, substance abuse and school failure prevention, and reduced referrals to special education.

Single Site Pre-Post Outcome Evaluation: Each new FAST site is required to administer standardized pre- and post-questionnaires to parents, teachers, and youth, for purposes of local program evaluation and certification. The data is coded and entered by staff members of the FAST National Training Center, who oversee the completion of a final evaluation report for every site.

Making a Difference!

“ Now I know that no matter what—I have a voice. ”

FAST Teen

“ I told my husband he had to go to FAST. He's glad he did, though. I called those 10 weeks 'forced family time.' Life can get so busy that you can forget to stop and take time with your family. I have strengthened my bond with my husband and with my children. I still try to spend that one-on-one time with each individual child during the week. ”

FAST Parent

Impact on Youth:

- Improved academic competence and performance.
- Improved social skills and attention span.
- Reduced anxiety, depression, and aggressive behavior.

Impact on Families:

- Reduced family conflict.
- Parents pursue further adult education.

Impact on Schools:

- Reduced problem behaviors on the part of students in school.
- Increased parent involvement in school.

Impact on Communities:

- Improved friendship networks.
- Increased parent leadership in civic projects.
- Reduction in juvenile delinquency and substance abuse problems.



Program Tips

- Parental involvement is central to this program's success. The FAST philosophy is that all parents love their children and want the best for them; but stress, social isolation, work schedules—as well as depression—often interfere with parents' ability to follow through on these feelings and desires. The key is to approach parents and caregivers with respect, a nonjudgmental attitude, and with actual support while modeling the skills they need to become an essential protective factor in their children's lives.

- Use existing research to plan and implement your program. Each component of FAST was designed to contribute to one of the following protective factors that have been proven to contribute to child well-being:
 - A strong positive and mutual parent-child bond.
 - A healthy bond between a couple, or a positive parent-to-parent bond.
 - A cohesive family unit.
 - A parent support network.
 - Parents' involvement in their children's school.
 - Parents' connections with, and positive attitudes toward, community agencies.

- Dosage is important. Youth and their families need to attend the full program to get the full benefit. Repetition is a key to learning new behaviors. Attending one or two sessions might be pleasant, but it will not enable participants to master new patterns of communication. FAST has tracked dosage over the years, and to see impact a family needs to attend 6 out of the 14 weeks of multifamily groups.

