Family Involved Rehabilitation Services Treatment (FIRST) Court: A Program Evaluation
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Introduction

- People are more willing to comply with decisions they perceive as made through fair process (Tyler, 1989)
- Problem-solving courts adopt processes that focus on rehabilitation (Berman & Feinblatt, 2001) and are increasingly utilized in abuse and neglect cases (Winick, 2003)
- Problem-solving courts provide more voice and are perceived as more fair (Gatowski et al., 2013)
- Process recipients who are allowed to voice but feel their voice is disregarded may perceive the court as being less fair, a phenomenon called “pseudo-voice” (de Vries, 2012)

FIRST Court seeks to encourage better communication and cooperation between parties, increase trust and improve relationships, bring families into the court more frequently, and increase parent participation

Evaluation examines: (1) do parents in FIRST Court participate more than parents in the traditional dependency court?; (2) do parents in FIRST Court participate more than parents in the traditional dependency court?

Method

- N = 85 hearings observed
- n = 39 FIRST Court team meetings
  - Mom present n = 28 (71.8%)
  - Dad present n = 19 (48.7%)
- n = 46 traditional review hearings
  - Mom present n = 35 (76.1%)
  - Dad present n = 21 (45.7%)

Types of parent participation:
- Initiating a new topic
- Asking a question
- Responding to a question
- Making a suggestion
- Not present = 0; Present = 1

- N = 33 (41.7%) parents surveyed
- Child Welfare and Procedural Justice Scale
- 12 items on 4-point Likert-type scales
- Higher scores denote higher perceived fairness

Results

- Parent Participation During Hearings
  - Mean Participation Score
  - FIRST Court: 3.34, SD = 1.23, n = 39
  - Traditional: 2.79, SD = 1.31, n = 35

- Parent Perceptions of Fairness
  - FIRST Court: 3.60, SD = 0.65, n = 19
  - Traditional: 3.16, SD = 0.74, n = 15

Discussion

- FIRST Court is accomplishing its goal of increasing parent participation: in FIRST Court, parent participation was much higher than in the traditional dependency court group.
- No significant difference between FIRST Court and traditional dependency court on perceptions of fairness. Both FIRST Court and traditional court parents perceived the court process as fair.
- Since parents are participating more, but not viewing the process as significantly more fair, this could be an example of pseudo-voice, where parents do not feel their voice is being heard.
- This could either indicate that FIRST Court is not meeting its overall goal of increasing perceptions of fairness, or could be indicative of a ceiling effect, since both groups of parents view the court as relatively fair.

Limitations & Future Directions

- These findings are based on a relatively small sample of parent interviews. This evaluation is ongoing and we will collect more data to detect significant differences between FIRST Court and traditional dependency court.
- Future studies should include a measurement of feelings that voice is disregarded by decision maker to fully test pseudo-voice hypothesis.
- Future studies of problem-solving courts should identify how to increase perceptions of fairness alongside increased participation.

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