



EXPLORING THE EVIDENCE:

The Value of Juvenile Drug Courts

By Jacqueline van Wormer, Ph.D., and Faith Lutze, Ph.D.

The juvenile drug court, like any problem-solving court, features familiar themes such as collaboration across agencies to meet the needs of the adolescent client, integrated treatment, appreciation for the power of change and growth of the adolescent, and strong judicial interaction. Although drug courts have made a large impact on the American court system, we need to consistently question and assess our programs. How well are we doing? What components combine to create an effective program? And most importantly, are juvenile drug courts making a positive difference in the lives of children and families? This article will focus on the latest juvenile drug court research findings, and will remind courts about the importance of following *Juvenile Drug Courts: Strategies in Practice (16 Strategies in Practice)* and maintaining and maintaining a focus on strong and effective collaboration. New research shows that not only can juvenile drug courts be effective in reducing recidivism and substance use among adolescents, but also that following the model and strategies is critical to program success.

UNDERSTANDING THE JUVENILE DRUG COURT MODEL

Juvenile drug courts are built on the principles of collaboration, integrated case management, and embracing a balanced approach between treatment and accountability, all while placing a special emphasis on adolescent development and peer and family dynamics. As juvenile drug courts have developed over the past decade, it is clear that they are unique because of the collaborative nature of the program, the increased reliance on frequent (weekly) judicial interactions, and the use of rewards and punishments to motivate for behavior change.¹ The most notable difference between the juvenile and adult drug court models is that juvenile drug court practitioners must manage a client who is undergoing a constant change process—otherwise known as adolescent development.² Brain growth and changes, increased importance of the social world vs. family needs, and gaining a sense of belonging are all constants in an adolescent's life.

Because of these unique considerations for juvenile drug court practitioners, the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the National Drug Court Institute, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention created the *16 Strategies in Practice* in 2003 (see box at right). In order to account for the development stages of adolescents and family dynamics, these standard strategies are more inclusive than the 10 Key Components used in adult drug courts. They also place a larger focus on ancillary services and school-based support, all of which have been shown in research to increase protective factors in youth.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

As is often the case in the criminal justice field, the identification and spread of a promising program often quickly outpaces any efforts to evaluate such programs. This was easily the case with drug courts. Early adult and juvenile drug court evaluations were methodologically weak and included small sample sizes and no control groups; some reports focused only on sharing findings of program graduates. A few very early reports even found that juvenile drug court participants had the same or even higher number of re-arrests as control group subjects.³

As more juvenile drug courts received federal funding to support start-up, the need to complete sound, professional evaluations increased. Between 2002 and 2010, numerous evaluations emerged, which matched drug court participants to control group participants and included strong sample sizes. These evaluations reported positive results, including reduced recidivism and greatly reduced substance use/abuse for juvenile drug participants.

THE 16 STRATEGIES OF JUVENILE DRUG COURTS

1. Engage all stakeholders in creating an interdisciplinary, coordinated, and systemic approach to working with youth and their families.
2. Develop and maintain an interdisciplinary, nonadversarial work team.
3. Define a target population and eligibility criteria that are aligned with the program's goals and objectives.
4. Schedule frequent judicial reviews and be sensitive to the effect that court proceedings can have on youth and their families.
5. Establish a system for program monitoring and evaluation to maintain quality of service, assess program impact, and contribute to knowledge in the field.
6. Build partnerships with community organizations to expand the range of opportunities available to youth and their families.
7. Tailor interventions to the complex and varied needs of youth and their families.
8. Tailor treatment to the developmental needs of adolescents.
9. Design treatment to address the unique needs of each gender.
10. Create policies and procedures that are responsive to cultural differences and train personnel to be culturally competent.
11. Maintain a focus on the strengths of youth and their families during program planning and in every interaction between the court and those it serves.
12. Recognize and engage the family as a valued partner in all components of the program.
13. Coordinate with the school system to ensure that each participant enrolls.
14. Design drug testing to be frequent, random, and observed. Document testing policies and procedures in writing.
15. Respond to compliance and noncompliance with incentives and sanctions that are designed to reinforce or modify the behavior of youth and their families.
16. Establish a confidentiality policy and procedures that guard the privacy of the youth while allowing the drug court team to access key information.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance. (2003). *Juvenile drug courts: Strategies in practice*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

Given that studies now exist that show that juvenile drug courts can reduce recidivism and substance use/abuse of participants, research has shifted to understanding exactly what makes a program successful. Research from both the adult and juvenile drug court fields has proven to be quite insightful. A great deal of research has been completed by NPC Research, which has tested and evaluated the impact on outcomes of following each of the individual 10 Key Components and/or *16 Strategies in Practice*. As is highlighted in the box below, not only do we know that juvenile drug courts can have a positive impact on participants, but that if the *Strategies in Practice* are followed, drug courts can strengthen the potential for positive outcomes for youth participants. While a few of these findings are specific to adult drug courts (such as team member staffing patterns), applicability to juvenile drug courts is still very relevant.

WHAT WE KNOW

- When juvenile drug courts utilize a wide range of non-detention-based sanctions, they can experience cost-savings as high as \$5,000 per participant.⁴
- Team members matter! Juvenile drug court team members need to be aligned philosophically, and the judge continues to be a critical position on the team—for the youth, families, and team members.⁵
- Adding and adhering to evidence-based practices (e.g. multi-systemic therapy), to the juvenile drug court model, as well as addressing parental supervision and peer influence, significantly increases positive outcomes.⁶
- Youth who have active parent participation in the drug court perform better while in the drug court program compared to youth with non-involved parents.⁷
- Exposure to professional training, as well as frequency of training, is correlated with stronger adherence to the *16 Strategies in Practice*. In other words, train often and ensure that all team members are exposed to a wide range of training topics.⁸
- Team members must be assigned to the drug court for a significant period of time. Rotating and/or temporary positions are ineffective and negatively impact the cost-benefit of the program.⁹

Using incentives and sanctions.

It is important for juvenile drug court teams to utilize a wide range of individualized incentives and sanctions for young participants. It is easy for drug courts to get hooked on offering up the same “top three” incentives and sanctions for all youth across the board. The purpose of incentives (such as certificates, gift cards, and applause) and sanctions (including writing essays, community service, and detention) is to motivate the youth to change his or her behavior. This should be achieved through personalized responses, in conjunction with treatment, and teams should use both behavior and activity contracts to help bring about lasting change.¹⁰ It is not uncommon to see drug courts fall back on the use of detention due to frustration with the client, lack of alternatives, or because they utilize a standardized response system. Juvenile drug courts that use detention as a last resort will experience greater cost savings over time.

Team members matter!

As was noted above, juvenile drug courts are essentially a collaborative effort and a process that takes commitment and ongoing training to ensure growth. Drug court teams that have all team members present at both staffing and in court (judge, prosecutor, defense attorney, probation, treatment, and case management) experience stronger graduation rates and better cost-savings. Because juvenile drug court teams are often so client focused, it is easy to forget about the business of building and maintaining a strong team. Research has continually shown the judge to be a natural leader and parental figure for both the client and team members. It is important that judges maintain as long a tenure in the program as possible. Of course, longer tenure for all other team members is also recommended, as it allows teams to be better trained, and ideally, become philosophically aligned on key issues.

Using evidence-based practices increases positive outcomes.

The blending of evidence-based practices into the juvenile drug court model, as well as building up parental resources, has been shown to increase outcomes for juvenile drug court participants. Although many jurisdictions are currently facing fiscal challenges, numerous evidence-based and promising practices exist that can be easily built into programs at minimal cost. Teams should work closely with their treatment providers to explore options that best fit for their funding structures and communities. Of course, the key is ensuring quality adherence to the new treatment intervention.

Active parent participation is key.

Research has consistently shown that programs are most successful when they actively address participants’ negative peer associations, as well as the often complex family dynamics—including family members with their own addictions—that many drug court youth are dealing with. Juvenile drug court participants who have involved and supportive parents are more likely to be actively engaged in the court program, as well as in treatment. Although some jurisdictions have the ability to involve parents via court order, others do not have this option and must rely on different engagement techniques. One cost-effective way to engage parents is to operate a “parent support group” directly following the weekly JDC session.¹¹ This session can be staffed by an outside treatment provider or designated juvenile court worker, and operates as a way to not only educate family members on the complexities of addiction and adolescent development, but also gives these family members an opportunity to begin to address some of their own issues and realize they are not alone in the journey.

ENSURING CONTINUED RESULTS

Many great reforms in the criminal justice system have been born from grassroots movements and the committed, passionate individuals who recognize the need to do something beyond “business as usual.” And while a new program or policy change may appear to be very promising in one jurisdiction, replication and sustaining such efforts across different sites can be a challenge.¹² The juvenile drug court movement is not immune to this problem.

In a recent nationwide survey conducted by researchers at Washington State University of adult and juvenile drug court team members, a few interesting findings were uncovered that are worth noting. The survey focused on how well drug courts are following the *16 Strategies in Practice*, how well team members collaborate across systems and perceive personal and systems benefits of the program, and whether survey respondents feel that their program has changed (either positively or negatively) over time. When asked if their team followed the *16 Strategies in Practice*, 32% of the juvenile drug court survey respondents did not know, and 28% reported “somewhat.” Juvenile drug court respondents appeared to understand or more fully adopt the adult court’s 10 Key Components, with 47% of juvenile drug court team members reporting that they follow the 10 Key Components for program operation. Only 8% of juvenile drug court respondents reported that the 10 Key Components were not applicable.¹³

This finding highlights the level of discretion that is available to teams when considering and adopting practices. It is also important to remember that some of these juvenile drug court respondents may have built their programs before exposure to the *16 Strategies in Practice*. While the 10 Key Components are an important blueprint for courts, the *16 Strategies in Practice* were developed in order to specifically address unique adolescent needs, such as integration of school officials in the process, understanding adolescent development, and the engagement of family in the recovery process. Failure to address some of these critical areas can greatly impact the likelihood of program success.

Ensure team members receive adequate training.

This national survey research also found that as types and levels of formalized training increase, adherence to the drug court model increases,

Carey and colleagues found that drug courts that received formalized training prior to implementation experienced 15 times the cost savings of other drug courts.

an important finding that highlights the absolute necessity of ongoing and comprehensive training. In their analyses of 18 adult drug courts, Carey and colleagues found that drug courts that received formalized training prior to implementation experienced 15 times the cost savings of other drug courts.¹⁴ In addition, drug courts that provided *ongoing* formalized training also experienced strong cost-benefits. In essence, team members with greater amounts of training are more likely to accurately and realistically reflect on the true operations of drug courts. This reflection will allow team members and courts to better position themselves to control for drug court drift¹⁵ and mission creep.

Team members committed for the long term are the most effective.

The national survey also found that the greater number of hours assigned to drug court the more likely juvenile drug court team members were to believe that their court follows the model. Long assignment periods for team members are ideal, as they allow for better understanding of all the intricacies of the juvenile cases, as well as for full assimilation

of the strategies into daily operations. This may be especially challenging for juvenile drug courts, because criminal justice personnel are often assigned to juvenile courts for short stints at the beginning of their careers to gain experience before moving on to the “real” work of the adult system. Time and effort must also be spent ensuring that all team members support the philosophical orientation of the model, that is, the balance between treatment and accountability.

This survey also found that team members who have strong levels of training and have served on the drug court for a longer period of time express stronger levels of system benefits and fewer system drawbacks. In other words, team members with longer tenure and more training reported higher levels of trust, as well as stronger collaboration between social service, public health, and educational systems. These team members also believed that they are more able to effectively meet the needs of the clients, as well as impact public policy in their communities.

CONCLUSION

Juvenile drug courts have moved beyond their infancy and have proven their effectiveness when implemented and maintained according to the *16 Strategies in Practice*. Research clearly shows that participation by a full and balanced team, formal training, and longer tenure on the team make a difference in reducing recidivism and reducing costs. Juvenile courts considering the creation of a drug court model need to be aware of the importance of building their program on the *16 Strategies in Practice*. For those programs that are currently in an operations or maintenance mode, continual evaluation of adherence to the *16 Strategies in Practice* is critical in order to ensure positive outcomes.

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Success Story from the Cole County, Mo., Juvenile Drug Court

By Judge Patricia Joyce

Carrie* started the juvenile drug court program (JDC) like many other young people who have a drug problem. She was struggling in school with frequent absences, suspensions, and failing grades. She had already finished two inpatient treatment programs with little success after discharge. After picking up additional charges for possession of marijuana and violating the conditions of her probation, Carrie was in danger of being sent to the detention facility for an extended stay. Her mother had abandoned her to her father who was facing pending methamphetamine charges.

The drug court team agreed to accept her into the program even though there seemed to be little likelihood of success. Her father rarely brought her for court reviews, and the juvenile officers spent countless hours trying to find her due to absences at school and at treatment. After completing a 60-day inpatient stay, Carrie became engaged in school and treatment. She attended the drug court summer school and enjoyed the school and treatment. Back in the regular school, however, her grades began to slip and her friends were constantly in trouble. Her father was continuing to use substances, and Carrie was giving up on any hope of sobriety. She agreed that she needed another inpatient program.

Upon her release from inpatient, Carrie moved in with her aunt who enforced the rules and made sure she attended school. Her aunt always accompanied her to court and reported on all of the changes that Carrie was making. Her grades improved dramatically and she was accepted into the alternative school. Her treatment and probation officer recommended that she graduate from drug court.

Carrie graduated two days before her 17th birthday, and the day after her dad was arrested for drug possession. Now a straight-A student, she graduated a semester early from high school. The principal said she

wished that all of her students could be just like Carrie. Through the tears of sadness about her father and pride in her accomplishments, Carrie thanked the drug court team for saving her life. The team was just glad to be along on the journey.

COLE COUNTY JDC'S RECIPE FOR SUCCESS:

- Juvenile drug courts often have to work with families that have many, if not more, of the same problems that the youth has. The Cole County JDC had to utilize wrap-around (i.e., treatment, transportation, or health care) services to engage and help Carrie and her family.
- Youth with high risks and/or needs require the most help and may seem the least likely group to succeed in a JDC program. But, these are the youth who most benefit from services. For this reason, Cole County uses a screening and assessment tool to help determine which young people should enter the program.
- The intensive supervision (i.e., frequent court reviews, community supervision) and extended services (treatment, JDC summer school) received in JDCs have lasting effects on the youth in JDC programs. The Cole County JDC has weekly reviews with the judge and the juvenile drug court team to assess any progress or problems the youth may have had during the week.
- Research has shown that strong family involvement results in more positive outcomes for youth involved in JDC. Keep in mind that family involvement may have to be redefined (such as, an aunt or uncle in place of a parent). It was important for the Cole County JDC to keep engaging a family member to be involved with the program with Carrie—even if that family member was not the “traditional” parent.

Judge Patricia Joyce, Circuit Judge in the 19th Judicial Circuit of Missouri, is the presiding judge for the juvenile, family, and adult drug courts. She serves on the board of the Missouri Association of Drug Court Professionals.

**Name has been changed.*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Jacqueline van Wormer, Ph.D., Assistant Professor at Washington State University, has 18 years of experience in the criminal justice system, 12 of which have been focused on juvenile and adult drug court models. She frequently teaches and writes on juvenile drug court issues for the NCJFCJ. **Faith Lutze, Ph.D.**, is an Associate Professor at Washington State University. Her current research interests include the rehabilitative nature of prison environments, drug courts, and violence toward women.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Courts interested in implementing a new juvenile drug court or strengthening an existing program should take advantage of two recent NCJFCJ resources:

- The Technical Assistance Brief, *Managing and Sustaining Your Juvenile Drug Court* (April 2010), discusses the need for juvenile drug courts to pay special attention to effectively maintaining their team and program and understanding the “lifecycle” of their program.
- In addition, all drug court teams should focus on controlling for drug court drift, or mission creep. The Technical Assistance Brief, *Ensuring Fidelity to the Juvenile Drug Courts Strategies in Practice—A Program Component Scale* (April 2010), provides a useful performance measurement tool, which juvenile drug courts should use on a regular basis (at least yearly) to assess how well current program operations adhere to the *16 Strategies in Practice*.

You can find these and many other drug court-related resources on NCJFCJ’s newly launched juvenile drug court Web site at <http://www.ncjfcj.org/content/view/290/628/>.

END NOTES

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- van Wormer, *supra* note 5.
- Carey et al., *supra* note 5; Goldkamp, J.S., White, M.C., & Robinson, J.B. (2001). *From whether to how drug courts work: Retrospective evaluation drug courts in Clark County (Las Vegas) and Multnomah County (Portland)*. Final project report.
- Examples of both behavioral contracts and activity contracts, as well as the rationale and use of such tools, can be found on the NCJFCJ Web site, under the Juvenile Drug Court tab.
- An excellent example of this program comes from the Toledo, Ohio juvenile drug court. This parent support group meets directly after the JDC session and is staffed by an outside treatment provider and juvenile court worker. The youth attends a separate, on-site sober support meeting during the same time period. Parents overwhelmingly reported feeling a sense of comfort, understanding, and empowerment from their group involvement.
- Urban, L.S. (2008). Issues in juvenile program implementation: A case study. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 33, 99-112; van Wormer, *supra* note 5.
- van Wormer, *supra* note 5.
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- Drug court drift is defined as the gradual shift away from original policies and procedures due to various “external and internal shocks” such as team turnover, change in political support, financial challenges, and failure to use internal data to understand changes in youth populations (e.g., types of offenses committed by youth, changes in drug use patterns). Failure to control for drug court drift can essentially return a program back to “business as usual.”



Dr. Sue Yeres (left) and Betty Gurnell served as facilitators at the PAC meeting.

Juvenile Drug Courts – 2.0

NCJFCJ’s Juvenile and Family Law Department, which has been providing training and technical assistance to the juvenile drug court field since 1998, was awarded the 2010 Juvenile Drug Court Training and Technical Assistance grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in October. This funding provides the opportunity to step back and look at the juvenile drug court field as a whole and determine how best to move the field forward. In order to begin envisioning the future of the field, the JFLD has formed a Project Advisory Committee (PAC) to serve as the driving force for training and curriculum development. Because NCJFCJ’s vision for juvenile drug courts consists of a more holistic viewpoint, members from a wide array of systems (i.e., researchers/evaluators, mental health, schools, substance abuse/use treatment, mentoring programs, screening/assessment, and juvenile justice) were invited to participate in the first PAC meeting.

The JFLD convened the first PAC meeting Feb. 24-25, 2011 in Reno, Nev. The purpose of the PAC meeting was to visualize resources and policies needed for a juvenile drug court “in a perfect world”; identify the gaps between the “perfect world” and our current one; and propose training- and technical assistance-focused solutions. Among the meeting’s highlights was the construction of a timeline highlighting not only the notable dates in juvenile drug court history, but also milestones from the fields of substance abuse treatment, mental health, and education. At the conclusion of the meeting, the PAC identified people, publications, and programs that could serve as NCJFCJ resources and discussed creative ways to market the availability of training and technical assistance.

It was clear from the meeting’s discussions that juvenile justice in general and juvenile drug courts in particular will benefit greatly from current research on adolescent development, mental health and trauma, and substance abuse treatment. As this research continues, courts will have a greater understanding of the underlying reasons that young people use and abuse substances, while also having more tools to appropriately address this behavior. NCJFCJ is planning to create training and technical assistance tools for juvenile drug courts to incorporate research into their day-to-day practices.

In addition, feedback that NCJFCJ has received from the field via an online survey has made it clear that training and technical assistance are very much needed. Many JDCs are currently struggling with sustainability issues and resource development. These courts need information and technology transfer training on creating community partnerships and collaborative planning to continue operation. NCJFCJ has several resources that can be downloaded at no charge from www.ncjfcj.org that may help JDCs that are dealing with these