Introduction and Background to FAST

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is a developmental, risk focused, early intervention/prevention program built on the knowledge that effective prevention must reduce cumulative risks and combinations of factors that increase risk for children, as well as enhance protective factors in families that buffer children from such multiple risks.

The FAST program targets the underlying causes of being at risk of educational failure, substance abuse, violence and delinquency. The approach is voluntary and uses combinations of incentives to get high participation with low-income, stressed and isolated parents. FAST’s strategy is to reduce the causal factors related to those problems by starting with young children and adopting a family-based model. FAST develops a support network for the family and empowers parents to be the primary prevention agent for their own child/ren. FAST provides a structured, fun-filled, interactive, multi-family group program run in the child’s primary school to implement goals of prevention and family strengthening.

Developed in 1988 by Dr. Lynn McDonald, the FAST program began in Madison, Wisconsin School District with support from philanthropic trusts and Family Services America. The program was designed around emerging research indicating partnerships between schools, communities and parents could prevent school-related performance and behavioural problems. FAST also incorporates knowledge from family stress and prevention theory; delinquency prevention, building resilience, clinical techniques used in child therapy, family therapy, small group processes, community organizing; as well as best practice and evidence-based findings from published social research journals which strengthen and enhance positive parenting outcomes and pro-social development of children & youth.

The above knowledge and techniques were synthesized and then applied systematically in FAST. Rather than teaching in a didactic mode, all family learning occurs through a series of alternative, repeated, structured, personal, highly interactive, fun sequenced activities with the child’s family and peers. Each activity is interactive with clear learning goals for the benefit of the child and the family, but they feel like fun! Parent learning occurs in the process of talking and listening to other parents, not in structured parent-education training. Parents and children will immediately feel benefit as they feel good during the first session. Participation in the structured, highly interactive, positive activities makes them want to repeat those exercises.

McDonald designed FAST to strengthen formal and informal networks for families, collaboration between community systems, resulting in the empowerment of parents to support their child/ren’s prosocial development and educational success.

FAST has been shown to work. Families enjoy the program and statistical data shows that the FAST program makes a predictable 20% positive difference in overall family functioning and in children’s individual behaviours, both at home and at school in 8 weeks. The evaluation shows on a standardized quantitative scale measuring conduct disorder (indicator of juvenile offending and court involvement) a substantial and significant improvement. Importantly, these changes are maintained and improved over time. Moreover, FAST has been shown to successfully work with stressed, depressed, impoverished, isolated and hard-to-reach, at-risk families.

FAST has been implemented in 34 American states, 400 plus schools, three Indian Nations and five countries.
Australian FAST Program Development

Kildonan Child & Family Services (Melbourne), a welfare agency of the Uniting Church, piloted the FAST program in February 1997. Funds were received from the Ian Potter Foundation and the Uniting Church to pilot the first two school sites in February 1997. The initial school sites were located in a growth corridor on the northern fringes of metropolitan Melbourne. Commencing Term 2, 2000 a replication project to implement ten FAST programs in Victoria was funded by the Potter Foundation, the Ross Trust and the Uniting Church Community Share Appeal. By the end of Term 3/2000, 19 FAST programs, (four States) will have been implemented in Australia. FAST has been well received by schools, participating parents and collaborative agencies.¹

FAST Program and Crime Prevention

A recent National Crime Prevention report, Pathways to Prevention takes the view: that the roots of criminal offending are complex and cumulative, and that they are embedded in social as well as personal histories. The report proposes that to uncover significant risk factors that are the facilitating conditions for entry into a criminal career requires a life course perspective that views each young offender as someone who is developing over the life course and in specific social settings.(in Pathways to Prevention,1999:4)

The report sites Farrington’s work (in Pathways to Prevention,1999:7) regarding distinctions in crime prevention approaches, listing four categories:
- criminal justice
- situational
- community (or social)
- developmental.

FAST fits the latter two crime prevention approaches, the community (or social) and developmental.
- Community (or social) prevention ‘refers to interventions designed to change the social conditions or institutions…that influence offending’(in Pathways to Prevention, 1999:7). FAST focuses on children identified at-risk of serious behavioural and learning difficulties and intervenes at the local school level through an inter-agency collaborative approach with parent-professional membership on the team.
- Tremblay & Craig expand Farrington’s definition of developmental prevention, ‘as interventions aiming to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors that are hypothesized to have a significant effect on an individual’s adjustment at later points of development.’ (in Pathways to Prevention, 1999:8) FAST utilises knowledge of the above factors and through an whole family approach, develops positive bonds and relationships at multiple levels to counteract these risks and reduce behaviour problems correlated with later violence, delinquency, substance abuse and school failure.

¹ The author was the CEO at Kildonan at the time of the FAST pilot.
The Pathways to Prevention report goes on to argue that developmental approaches are not linear, but instead a series of phases, a series of points of change, a series of transitions. These phases and transition points are where intervention can occur most effectively. Further, the developmental approach is characterised by a pervasive emphasis on pathways and on aspects of time and timing. This conceptual framework has a focus on pathways, a road through life that can fork out in different directions at the kinds of crucial transition points that mark new experiences and relationships. *Early intervention* means intervention early in the pathway. The developmental approach must also take into account *social context* of the individual and family. Understanding social context or the current environment is critical because social contexts can make a difference to the skills and strategies that the individual can develop. Social support and access to information are critical to assist individuals make transitions in the developmental pathways model.

FAST has the following characteristics of a *developmental prevention model*:

- intervention early in the life course – at-risk children identified by teachers being at risk of school failure, criminality and substance abuse, aged 4-9 years
- primary school is the pathway-a transition point to provide early intervention support to vulnerable, stressed families with identified at-risk children prior to entrenched behaviour developing
- local community-based, neighbourhood area approach
- inclusive whole, or entire family approach, including fathers/partners
- selective targeting and participation of entire families at the risk of multiple risk factors in the cluster of family, school, community and individual/peer. (Developmental Research & Programs Inc. 1993:3-12)
- intervention takes place through a combination of multiple social contexts – family, school, peers groups (both adults and children) and a community based parent-professional collaborative, thereby adopting a systemic approach to change and the development of protective factors that promote family resilience and the prevention of maladaptive behaviours.

FAST is a program that attempts to divert parents and children from harmful pathways before maladaptive patterns of behaviour are well entrenched in the period of adolescence. FAST combines the understandings of risk and protective factors into its program design and incorporates research findings and starts early, in primary school, prior to problems developing and /or becoming entrenched.

In summary, FAST is a developmental prevention program run in a primary school, targeting multiple risk and protective factors at the early life phase (4-9 years) and transition point (primary school) in the family life course and individual children’s development. FAST, through the parent and professional collaborative, systemically builds community to develop a supportive family environment and school that promotes the healthy, pro-social development of children.

**FAST Program Description**

FAST is an eight week, multi-family group, parent involvement process with structured activities aimed at enhancing family functioning, building social connections and reducing social isolation.
FAST is usually run in a primary school setting. There are three phases in FAST:

1. An outreach process by trained FAST parent and professional partners to invite whole family participation in FAST through face-to-face visits at the parent’s home and convenience.
2. An 8 week (2½ hour school-based meetings) multi-family engagement process for 10-15 families facilitated by a trained parent and professional collaborative team partnership.
3. An ongoing two year follow-up program, FASTWORKS, a monthly re-union of multi-family meetings of FAST graduates which is run by the parents with the support of the FAST team.

FAST is a two year, school based primary school level program which:
1. Builds bonds, trust and supportive networks for families and children.
2. Increases parent involvement with children both at school and at home.
3. Increases resiliency, attention span and readiness to learn in primary school aged children.

FAST Program Goals

FAST has the ultimate goal of:
- Increasing the likelihood of the child being successful in the home, in the school and the community.

To achieve improved child outcomes in these areas, FAST builds the central protective factor of family cohesion, which is achieved through the following program goals:
- **Strengthening the parent and enhancing family functioning.**
  This occurs through the strengthening of the child-parent relationship in specific, focused ways. This enhancement also empowers the parents to become the primary prevention agents for their children.
- **Prevent the target child from experiencing school failure.**
  This is accomplished by working to improve the child’s behaviour and educational performance in the school setting, both on a short-term and long-term basis. Empowering the parents in their roles as ‘partners’ in their child’s educational process is another objective of this goal. Increasing the child and family’s feelings of affiliation toward the child’s school helps prevent school failure.
- **Prevent alcohol and other drug abuse by the child and the family.**
  Essentially, this goal is achieved by increasing the family’s knowledge and awareness of substance abuse and the impact it has upon child development, while linking the family to the appropriate assessment and treatment services, as needed.
- **Reduce the chronic daily stress that parents and children experience from daily life situations.**
  This requires the development of an on-going support group of parents of at-risk children (FASTWORKS). Linking the family to appropriate social services and community resources is also important. Lastly, building the self-esteem of each family member is necessary.
FAST Collaborative Team

FAST is run by a community collaborative team, with an essential core of four partners from the school, a community based agency, a drug and alcohol agency, a parent (preferably a FAST graduate) plus other community agencies. A FAST team can recruit up to 10 members, plus volunteers. Parents are always paid team members. Volunteers are recruited to support the collaborative team implement the program.

The FAST team participates in a collaborative two day training process and works together to implement the 8 week sessions. Team members are united by common values and approach that transcends disciplinary affiliations.

Target Group

FAST targets primary school aged children, aged 4-9 years, prep to grades 3 & 4. Targeted children are usually experiencing disruptive behaviours at school and home and are considered at risk of educational failure for a variety of reasons. School personnel determine which children are targeted and approach parents to invite families to participate in the program. FAST may be offered as either a universal prevention program – family strengthening, or as a selective early intervention program, targeting at-risk students.

Participation in FAST is voluntary. FAST has been successful in engaging isolated, hard-to-reach families, those whom schools say you will never get them to attend!!! Australian data indicates that 94% of families attending the first session will complete the 8 week program. A typical FAST program has between 10-15 families participating, a total of 20 –30 adults with up to 30 – 45 plus children involved per evening session. With the entire family participating, a ripple effect spreads the benefits of FAST to all participating children, not just the targeted child.

To promote participation, FAST offers incentives such as transportation, a meal, child care, adult company as well as respect and social support. Each family wins a prize sometime during the 8 week sessions. Assertive outreach and home visiting is paramount to recruit and maintain families in the program.

Recruitment Process

The school decides which group of students will be targeted and this can be done in a variety of ways: all grade 1 students, children’s academic level, school attendance, classroom behaviours - withdrawn, over-active, aggressive, violent, limited attention span, poor peer interaction, immaturity, special educational needs, students experiencing social problems and family difficulties impacting on educational performance/development, etc. The FAST program assumes that participating families are at-risk, that is families are under stress and need social support, yet the program never directly focuses on the risk. Participating families are not labeled as dysfunctional families, but instead engaged through shared school and parent concerns about children’s achievement at school.

The school notifies the parents as to why their child has been selected and asks permission for a member of the FAST Team to visit and explain the FAST program. If permission is given, a joint home visit of the parent partner and a professional team member visit the family in their home, explain the program and invites the whole family to come to try the first session.
American statistics indicate that 80% of families attending the first session will complete the 8 week program. Australian data is mirroring this data. After 8 programs, 74 families attending, 71 or 94% of families completed the 8 week program. Remember, these are hard-to-reach, uninvolved families who schools said would never come!

**What Happens Each Week?**

FAST’s multi-family program activities deliberately focus on overcoming multiple stressors, isolation, social and emotional disconnectedness. FAST is designed so that everyone can have some fun, while systematically enhancing parent-child interactions, empowering parents and building parent support networks. FAST enhances the well-being of families by offering a series of repeated, structured, personal, highly interactive, fun activities with the child’s family and peers. The effectiveness of FAST is the application of research-based, systematic interpersonal engagement strategies, which increase positive protective factors that sustain healthy behaviours.

FAST is not a traditional didactic parent education program. Intervention takes place through a combination of multiple social contexts – family, school, peers groups (both adults and children). Each activity is interactive with clear learning goals for the benefit of the child and the family, but the goal is achieved through fun and laughter! Parent learning occurs in the process of talking and listening to other parents, not in structured parent-education training.

**8 Weekly Multi-Family Group Sessions**

Each of the FAST’s multi-family program activities deliberately focuses on overcoming multiple stressors, isolations and social/emotionally disconnectedness.

Positive bonds are directly promoted on seven levels of the child’s ecology (McDonald & Sayger, 1998):

- at-risk child-to-parent bond
- family unit bonds
- parent-to-parent bond
- parent-to-self-help group bonds
- parent affiliation to school
- parent linkages to community treatment/counseling agencies
- empowerment of parent/positive attitude.

The 2½ hour weekly meetings are process oriented, that is structuring the participants for each of the interactional units:

- family table based activities for one hour
- adults pair up in dyads for 15 minutes
- adults meet in a self-help group for 45 minutes, while
- children build peer connections in age appropriate activity groups for 1 hour
- parent and at-risk child spend quality time together for 15 minutes
- whole multi-family group assembles for prizes, personal achievement announcement and a final goodbye ritual.
The multiple strategies are tightly sequenced to produce change at multiple levels of functioning in the family and between families. Conflict and criticism are explicitly blocked through the FAST team giving instructions to the parents - putting parents in charge of their children and supporting them during the multi-family group activities. The team implements parent empowerment training by way of increasing the parent’s power within their family, frequent rehearsals of new behaviours practiced in FAST and experiences of success. The activities consistently promote laughter and sharing within families, as well as across families. Activities are non-verbal as well as verbal, allowing multi-age participation, across multiple levels of literacy. The synergy of multiple interventions within multiple social contexts adds to the program’s impact.

**FAST’s Multiple Strategies/Interventions**

The activities at each weekly session are structured and based on research that indicates successful outcomes for parent-child relationships. Each activity is included for a reason and no component can be left out.

The first hour of the session is family time. Families sit at a table as a family to the exclusion of others. FAST members may only join the family at the table if they ask permission from the parent and/or are invited to the table by the parent.

**Family Flag**

Based on structural family therapy principles (Minuchin 1979, 1986), in particular activities in which a boundary is drawn around the family to the exclusion of non-family members and the inclusion of family members, the first activity of Week 1 is the making of a family flag. Each family sits at a family table. The family unit is protected from intrusions and separate tables for each family promote its boundary. Led by the parents, the family makes a flag of their choosing from the variety of craft objects given, the only rule being that each member of the family must place something on the flag (even the baby, although this may be chosen for them). A photograph is then taken of each family with their flag. The flag and the photo are kept on the table for the next 8 weeks as their family symbol and their space. At the end of the program the families take their flag home.

**Family Meal**

The families share a meal together (often a rare occurrence nowadays) with the children serving the parents. Immediately, the parent experiences something different – the FAST Team respecting parents’ hard work as parents, giving them a break from serving the children. The FAST Team supports the children to serve their parents. None of this is articulated, only experienced. The activity of the meal is organised to separate the generations in the family and to identify the children as children, and adults as adults. All instructions in FAST are directed to the parents, highlighting the executive or parental sub-system and assumes that they usually do the work at home serving the meals. This is a family message about hierarchy, clarifying generational boundaries within the family system.
FAST Hello

Then follows the ritual of the FAST hello with each family being welcomed in turn. The FAST hello has been reported by the teachers as a symbol of the bonding occurring amongst the FAST kids through the week at school.

Singing

Group singing follows. Items from families are always welcome and the singing concludes with the singing of the FAST song. Rituals that are shared, repeated and do not involve alcohol or drugs can strengthen familial resistance to the transmission of alcohol and drug abuse. Singing each week is such a ritual, of course without alcohol.

Structured Family Communication Exercises

The final half-hour of the family time is spent in two family communication games emphasizing fun and play. The games are turn taking and positive family inquiry, both of which lay the foundation for family conflict resolution. These exercises are based on delinquency prevention research (Alexander & Parsons, 1973,1982) and on substance abuse prevention (Schedler & Block 1990).

The activities are fun and everyone laughs as they participate together as a family. Everyone in the family begins to experience a sense of order, pleasure and fairness. The parents have created that feeling for their family.

Scribbles

During Scribbles, the parent directs one member of the family to get the scribble sheets and pencils for all the family. Each person secretly creates a picture out of a scribble. The parent directs each member of the family including themselves in turn to show their scribble, talk about it and have other family members ask questions, and be sure no criticisms are made. Families participate in this at their own level of comfort and depth.

Parsons & Alexander’s (1973,1982) in their family-based juvenile delinquency prevention research, determined that turn taking within family units and the process of positive enquiry (without criticism) about each other’s turns, could reduce recidivism by half. Randomly assigned court-involved adolescents were compared with behaviourally oriented family treatment, with no treatment and individual treatment. The risk of a second court-involved offense within 18 months was halved with the family-based, structured communication approach. The sibling rate of first-time court involvement was also reduced by half over a three-year period when the whole family unit was involved in the intervention.

Their communication exercises provide the foundation for problem solving of conflict, in that each person is listened to as they take turns giving their own perspective. Scribbles is based on this research – each person takes a turn to explain their drawing and is then asked positive questions about it by each family member.
Feelings Charades

In Feelings Charades, each member of the family selects a feeling card (from 10 most common feelings) and in turn (directed by the parent), acts out their feeling and others guess. Once the concept has been learnt, about week 3 or 4, people are instructed to choose a feeling they had today or recently. When the feeling has been guessed, each family member is encouraged to talk about the experience that occurred, when they had that feeling.

Schedler & Block (1990) in their longitudinal, 15 year study of pre-schoolers looked for patterns of alcohol use & abuse in the child at age 18. They then correlated abuse with variables from the early years of development. They found distinct patterns that correlated with abuse - these included hostile, critical, dominating and negative dysfunctional interactions in the family.

The positive Feelings Charades activity, around feelings being played out between and among family members, promotes the opposite kind of interaction from the high-risk style they identified.

Their research characterised the eventual substance abusers at the age of seven as anxious, inhibited, and immobilised under stress. These children are not warm, responsive, curious or open to new experiences, not active, vital or cheerful. They tend to be inappropriate in emotive behaviour, cannot admit to negative feelings, and prefer non-verbal methods of communication over verbal ones. They also tend to keep thoughts and feelings to themselves.

The Feelings Charades opens up new sets of behaviours for these at-risk children with contrast to those in the study. Dysfunctional behaviours of criticism, control, non-empathetic and non-enquiry are counteracted with parents making certain everyone gets a turn to act out their feeling, no-one criticises or makes fun of each other, nor negative judgments. Parents thank family members for sharing their feeling with the family.

Buddy Time

At the end of the first hour, the generations are split up - the children go off to play and the adults break into pairs. Parents have respite from their children for the next hour. The first 15 minutes of adult time is spent in pairs, with couples encouraged to spend this time together. Each person is instructed to spend 7 minutes telling about their day, the hassles and what happened with the other listening without giving advice or judgment. This hassle review talk is stress reducing. Breaking into dyads builds a buddy system, a beginning foundation of social supports.

Belle’s (1980) research on low-income, depressed mothers showed that these mothers interacted with their children in predictable ways: neglecting them when they were pre-occupied, hostile, angry and potentially abusive interactions when the children tried to engage their mothers. Belle found that if these mothers had supportive, intimate (that is a daily adult) relationship, these predictable interactions with their children were not as destructive and reduced the likelihood of child abuse.

Buddy Time on a weekly basis builds relationships within the parent group on a more intimate level with the effect of reducing stress as well as experiencing supportive one-to-one relationship/adult contact.
Children’s Activities

At the end of family time, the generations separate into adult and Kids’ Time. Children go off to have developmentally appropriate organized activities with other children to give them positive peer experiences. These activities are safe and fun, allow a release of energy, encourage positive friendships, development of social interaction skills, as well as nurture self-esteem. Volunteers are invaluable in this section as children are divided into developmental age groups for activities.

This activity re-inforces the splitting of the generational groups and differentiation in hierarchy. At FAST, we say it is time for the kids to play and the parents to talk, which further separates both, generationally as well as their respective activities.

Parent Self-Help Group

After Buddy Time, the whole group of adults convenes to hang out together for the next 45 minutes. The self-help group is co-facilitated by the parent liaison and the community-based agency partner. There is no particular agenda. In the Parent Self-Help Group, parents share their own successes and support one another to help their child succeed at school and at home. The aim of the group is to build friendship support networks amongst the parents and thereby reduce isolation. At the end of two years, parents rate the Parent Group as their one of their favourite parts of FAST.

Wahler’s (1983) research showed that parents who have been highly trained in behaviour modification parenting skills stopped using those skills six months later if they were socially isolated, that is having no-one to turn to when under stress. Egeland’s (1980) prospective studies on parents’ at-risk for child abuse & neglect showed that three common factors, (including impulse control problems, having been beaten as a child and deficit in parenting information) associated with child abuse & neglect were less predictive than the deadly combination of high stress & social isolation. Also, if the stresses are high and the parent has social connections upon which they can rely, the likelihood of abuse and neglect is not increased. From this research, the building of support networks is a critical component of any prevention program of abuse & neglect is essential. The Parent Self-Help group offers opportunities to build social connections.

Special Play: Quality Time

After experiencing the mutuality and support of the adult group time, the parent spends 15 minutes of quality time with the identified at-risk child (who returns from the children’s activities). For 15 minutes, the parent is coached (by the FAST Team) to follow their child’s lead and initiative in the play activities (materials provided). Parents are coached to not boss, teach, direct, nor judge the child during this one-to-one time. Parents are instructed to follow the child’s lead, let the child be in charge, and to describe or mimic what the child is doing. Special play is based on a child psychiatry technique developed by Dr. Kate Kogan (1975, 1978) and if done everyday at home for 15 minutes, can have a major impact on the mental health of the child, and parent-child relationship. This is a modified form of play therapy.

Kogan (1978) did this work in an out-patient psychiatric clinic that provided services to children, aged between 2-8, who were phobic, hyperactive, enuretic, depressed, had sleeping
disorders etc. All of these children had been referred by other professionals for treatment. The mothers voluntarily followed through on the referral. (In contrast to FAST, which works with children usually where parents have not sought previous help, initially the school is concerned about the child’s functioning/behaviour).

Mothers were asked to play with their child in a laboratory playroom and Dr. Kogan sat behind a one-way mirror where she coached the mother via an earpiece. The parent was provided with praise and constructive feedback about their play activities. Specifically, the play interaction was supposed to be non-judgmental and non-directive. If the parent taught, led the interaction or judged the child, feedback was given. Simply telling the facts or narrating the child’s initiated play activities was considered sufficient. Parents were asked to do daily homework for 15 minutes of uninterrupted time for 8 weeks.

Children showed impressive improvements in their functioning and behaviour during the 8 weeks. In FAST this technique has been adapted to be used with multiple family groups, the open coaching and used for prevention rather than for therapy.

Parents are encouraged to do this Special Play as homework everyday. A chart and stickers are given to the parents for encouragement of this activity. Special Play is the therapeutic edge of the FAST program and it is this component which makes the most difference in the parent-child relationship. When children are asked two years later what they enjoyed most about FAST, the majority nominate Special Play.

**Door Prize**

Parents and children then return to their family tables at the conclusion of Special Play for the drawing of the family prize. Parents have been told that the prize is fixed and that they will win once but this is a secret amongst the adults. The prize is a basket of family goodies, chosen specially for each family. Great hype surrounds the drawing of the winning ticket and the family is showcased as the winning family (these families often think of themselves as losers). The parents know that as a result of winning they will be expected to provide the meal for the next FAST session and the cooking pot is passed to them. Money is provided for the ingredients and assistance is available should families want assistance. The built-in reciprocity of exchange indicates a trust in and respect for the parent to come through with the responsibility after having won the prize.

Research on positive reinforcement for attendance in parenting groups by Richard Barth (1984) a behaviourist, reviewed the literature on how to optimise attendance of hard-to-reach families in parenting programs. Some have used cash payments, each week or at the end of the program. Vouchers or small prizes have been used. The advantages of a substantial prize, such as in FAST is that the re-inforcement is random, guaranteed and substantial. Parents do not know when they will win, but that it is guaranteed and random. Being tied to hosting the meal is built on Carl Dunst’s (1988) research about encouraging participation of low-income families and empowering parents in the process of participation. Dunst’s work on participation of low-income families and empowerment of parents in the process of participation, explains the importance of the universal cultural role of reciprocity – if you receive, you want to give back. No one feels dignified about themselves if they only receive (with the exception of children). It is essential to the empowerment of parents who are low-income to exchange, barter and reciprocate.
Announcements and Closing Ritual – RAIN

To end each evening all participants and team members gather in a large circle for special announcements, birthdays and the closing (non-verbal action activity) ritual of RAIN. Families leave in a happy uplifted fashion while the FAST Team members clean up, put the school rooms back together and meet for a debrief and planning for next session.

Special/Hard Topic Session – Week 5

In week 5, a special topic session, such as alcohol and other drugs, the Drug and Alcohol partner presents an activity around the topic of the effects of drugs on individuals/families. This information activity is targeted at the children, not the adults. The goal of the activity is to break the silence in the family regarding drug and alcohol issues. Following the presentation, a family activity is completed regarding the information session. This activity breaks down the no talk rule, which is often present in families with a drug dependency.

The substance abuse partner attends the Parent Self-Help Group and is available to provide further information or discuss particular parental concerns. The information is presented positively and not from a problem focus. Information about drug and alcohol services is also made available.

Other topics could include family violence, problem gambling or whatever is relevant for the particular school community. The community agency partner would present the topic and attend the parent’s group.

Graduation Ceremony

At the conclusion of the 8 week program, a Graduation Ceremony is held at the school. Guests are invited, graduation hats made and celebratory music used to highlight this significant event for the whole family. The school principal presents the Graduation Certificates and families are invited to join the FASTWORKS program. Families invite family and friends to celebrate their success, often the child will invite their teacher to the graduation. The evening is about experiencing success, recognition and affirmation of parents’ commitment to their children.

FASTWORKS

After the 8 week FAST program is completed:

- evaluations are completed to determine the impact of the program
- linkages are made to community services where requested - the appropriate FAST team member who knows and is trusted by the parent does this.
- the follow-up two-year program commences.
FASTWORKS is a monthly follow-up meeting which all families who have graduated from FAST are invited to attend for the next two years. FASTWORKS usually meets at the school. Parents determine the agenda and receive a small budget of $100 per month. Ongoing support from the school and the community-based agency is available to parents who now plan the multi-family monthly activities. Parents experience positive support networks and new friendships. The FAST program activities continue plus special events or outings as determined by the families.

**FAST Develops Protective Factors**

In summary, FAST builds protective factors throughout seven domains of the at-risk child’s ecology throughout the program and focuses on multiple social contexts or systems to reduce risk factors and maladaptive behaviour:

- **Child-to-parent bond.**
  
  This bond is specifically enhanced through Special Play, where the parent is coached to follow the child’s lead without criticising, teaching or bossing for 15 minutes. Parents are requested to do homework of Special Play daily for the next two years. The playing together opens communication and re-inforces positive parent-child bonds and develops children’s self-esteem.

- **Cohesive family unit bonds.**

  This bond is developed through creating family unity and cohesion by having the parent in charge of their family and all instructions are given to the parent(s) rather than children; sitting together for an hour at a family table-creating a family flag; parents delegate a child to serve their meal and eating a meal together; strengthening family communication through structured communication games - Scribbles and Feeling Charades which increases family intimacy skills and teaches skills of conflict resolution; identification of feelings as a family group; winning as a family; belonging to a group and parents sharing with other adults. These table based activities are underpinned by family therapy principles of helping the parent to be both firmly in charge of and lovingly connected to their children. These exercises develop parental skills in requesting compliance and monitoring children’s behaviour.

- **Intimate support network: parent-to-parent bond.**

  Positive parent-to-parent bonds is correlated with positive child outcomes. Research shows that regular daily intimate support from other parents/adults is a protective factor that keeps stressed parents and depressed mothers from abusing and neglecting their children. FAST builds supports to parents through strengthening marital/partner bonds or bonds between single parents by providing opportunities through Buddy Time, 15 minutes of uninterrupted time shared with another adult/or partner in each multi-family meeting. This 15 minute conversation time provides the opportunity for the growth of reciprocal, personal support for parents.

- **Parent-to-self-help group bonds.**

  During involvement in FAST, informal networks of support are developed and parents have the opportunity to meet weekly as a group, with respite from their children in an adult-only discussion group. The parent self-help group is not didactic, instead parents share and exchange supports and advice about parenting to help each other.
children succeed in school or at home, concerns about school, or whatever they wish to talk about. The relationships developed here continue in the community resulting in informal support networks, friendships counteract stress and isolation. The weekly repetition, followed by monthly sessions, increases involvement and affiliation with each other. Parents report this as their favourite part of FAST because it shows them they are not alone and they feel their advice is valued by other parents.

- **Parent affiliation to school.**
  The FAST program increases the at-risk child and family’s feelings of affiliation with the school. Positive, low-key interactions with school personnel outside of regular school build relationships that are not based on the at-risk child’s problem behaviours at school. FAST provides the opportunity for parents to be involved in their child’s school for positive reasons. Parents also get to meet school personnel who are in the role of support staff rather than teachers. FAST sets the environment in which school personnel and families can share positive activities without judgments, meet other parents and develop a supportive network, experience the school positively thus providing a platform for ongoing communication and support regarding their child/ren’s schooling and development.

- **Parent linkages to community agency connections.**
  Professionals are involved in FAST by participating on the FAST team without a professional agenda. Instead, professionals engage with parents in a supportive and respectful manner, offering support to parents during the weekly multi-family activities, providing information about available community services as requested, assisting with transport, and respecting parents as full members of the FAST team. Boundaries are broken down and team members’ involvement with parents during the FAST weekly activities increases affiliation with schools and community.

- **Empowerment of parent /positive attitude.**
  During FAST, parents experience themselves as being successful parents who created a positive, fun family time. Parents also talk about and share with other parents their successes of parenting. The FAST team respects and empowers parents to make decisions for their family through giving all directions to parents to organise their family throughout the 2½ hour session. Parents learn to control their children without co-er-cion and each week practice rehearsals of new behaviours and experience success. Parents grow in confidence and self-esteem improves as feelings of isolation and stress decrease. Parents begin to actively participate in their children’s schooling and volunteer in school activities and see themselves as partners in their children’s education.

**Conclusion**

The combination of these protective factors empowers parents and enhances parent-child and family relationships with each other, the school and wider community informal and formal support networks. FAST activities avoid labeling families as dysfunctional. Instead families are viewed as being stressed and FAST activities support family strengths and relationships to enable families to develop resources and resilience to counter life stresses in the current developmental pathway.
FAST is an innovative developmental prevention program, through its parent and professional community collaborative outreaches intervention early in the developmental pathway and social context of at-risk primary school aged children. Primary school is viewed as a key transition point in the at-risk child and family’s life, and provides the opportunity to proactively work in partnership with parents, community agencies and schools early in the identification of at-risk behaviours, to prevent future serious problems of violence, delinquency and school failure.

AUSTRALIAN FAST PROGRAM EVALUATION OUTCOMES

Does FAST really Help Kids do Better?

A major strength of FAST is its strong commitment to program effectiveness. Every activity of the program has been specifically built on a body of highly respected research. Unlike many prevention programs, FAST rigorously measures the impact on the participating children and families. The program routinely measures six outcomes using standardised instruments with established viability and reliability:

1. **Family Functioning**
   *FAST generally increases family cohesiveness, expressiveness and reduces conflict.*
   Family Environment Scale (FES) – Relationship Dimension (Moos & Moos 1986).
   *FAST increases family cohesion and adaptability.*

2. **Family Social Isolation**
   *FAST increases social connections.*
   Social Insularity Sub-scale of Parenting Stress Inventory (PSI) – (Abidin 1986).

3. **Parent Involvement at School**
   *FAST generally improves both parent and teacher’s perceptions; 92% of FAST graduates show increased involvement 2 years later in school and/or community.*

4. **Child Behaviour at Home as Rated by Parent**
   *The child’s behaviour generally improves by 25% in 8 weeks; 6 months and 2 year follow-up shows maintenance of gains.*
   Revised Behaviour Problem Checklist (RBPC) – (Quay & Peterson 1987).

5. **Child Behaviour at School as Evaluated by the Teacher**
   *The child’s behaviour generally improves 20% in 8 weeks, 6 months and 2 year follow-up shows maintenance of gains.*
   Revised Behaviour Problem Checklist (RBPC) – (Quay & Peterson 1987).

6. **Family-Consumer Rating of the FAST Experience**
   Families generally rate their satisfaction of FAST high. Retention rates are also a measure of consumer satisfaction. If a family comes one time, Australian indicates 94% of these complete the 8-week cycle and graduate.
The above mentioned standardised instruments are completed by teachers and parents pre-and-post the 8-week multi-family group cycle. The evaluation model provides comparative data from six perspectives about the targeted child’s behaviour, family functioning, school and community connections pre and post FAST program. Children who score high on the Revised Behaviour Problem Checklist (Quay & Peterson 1987) in the following sub-scales of:

- conduct disorder - high scores are positively correlated with juvenile offenders.
- attention problems - high scores are negatively correlated with academic achievement.
- anxiety withdrawal and motor excess – high scores are negatively correlated with substance abuse.

Children with high scores on these four sub-scales are placed at-risk for the development of later serious academic, abuse substance and delinquency problems.

The FAST program targets these at-risk children and involvement with their family in this multi-family program has shown to bring these initial high scores closer to normal children in an 8-week period, thus making their futures more optimistic and less problematic.

**PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS**

**Child Behaviour Improvement**

The Revised Behaviour Problem Checklist (RBPC) is used in the FAST program to examine behaviour change in children that fall in the at-risk area. At-risk children participating in the FAST program exhibit more problem behaviours than the normal population scaled by Quay-Peterson, but not as many as their clinical (children in outpatient and inpatient mental health treatment) population.

Australian evaluation data (McDonald & Sayger, 1999) parent pre-FAST program scores on the RBPC were compared to the clinical and normal populations. Parent post-test scores showed statistically significant (p< .0001) **32% decrease in the overall child behaviour problem scores.** Parents reported decreases in the four sub-scales:

- Conduct Disorder - 32% decrease in conduct disorder score, statistically significant (p<.0001).
- Attention Problems - 30% decrease in attention problems score, statistically significant (p<.0001).
- Anxiety – Withdrawal Problems - 31% decrease in anxiety problems score, statistically significant (p<.0001).
- Motor Excesses - 24% decrease in the motor excess score, statistically significant (p<.004).
Table 1. Revised Behaviour Problem Checklist Scores Reported by Parents. N=60

Table 2  Program Effectiveness - Child Behaviour Improvements reported by Parents

Teacher pre-FAST program scores on the RBPC were compared to the clinical and normal populations. Teacher post-test scores showed statistically significant (p<.001) *34% decrease in the overall child behaviour problem scores*. Findings suggest the initial scores on the sub-scales were within the *normal to near normal* range at pre-FAST, although the some sub-scale means neared the *clinical* range.

Teachers also reported decreases in the four sub-scales:

1. Conduct Disorder - 35% decrease in conduct disorder score, statistically significant (p<.019).
2. Attention Problems - 42% decrease in attention problems score, statistically significant (p<.0001).
3. Anxiety – Withdrawal Problems - 24% decrease in anxiety problems score, statistically significant (p<.045).
4. Motor Excesses - 29% decrease in the motor excess score, statistically significant (p<.028).
Table 3. Revised Behaviour Problem Checklist Scores Reported by Teachers. N=60

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</table>

Table 4. Program Effectiveness - Child Behaviour Improvements Reported by Teachers

The evaluation reported participating children having high initial levels of problem behaviours which placed them at-risk for the development of later serious academic, substance abuse and delinquency problems. The above quantitative reports from parents on the Revised Behaviour Problem Checklist post-test data show statistically significant reductions in the overall child behaviour problem scores, in particular, conduct disorder scores moved from the above normal range to the normal range, as did scores for attention and motor excess problems. Parents’ reports for anxiety-withdrawal scale, moved from the clinical range to the near normal range of scores.

Teachers’ reports also showed statistically significant reduction in problem behaviours which moved from the above normal range to normal range.
Family Functioning

Parents participating in the FAST program reported changes in their level of family functioning, in particular, a significant decrease in family conflict (p = .006) and statistically significant increases in the level of family cohesion (p = .0001), expressiveness (p = .037), and total relationship improvements, (p = .0001). Families are generally cohesive at the onset of the program due to the early intervention/prevention focus and these findings suggest participation in FAST had a general positive effect on relationships within families and that conflict was significantly reduced.

Table 5. Relationship Dimension of Family Environment Scale Reported by Parents N=54

Social Isolation & Stress

On the Social Insularity sub-scale of the Parenting Stress Inventory, parents reported a statistically significant (p = .001) decrease after their 8 week participation in FAST in their overall rating of their feelings of parenting stress and isolation due to lack of support. This finding suggests that parents’ stress levels decreased by 16% and their sense of social support increased as a consequence of involvement in FAST.

Summary

The following graph summarises FAST’s effectiveness and achievement of the program’s goals of improving the targeted child’s behaviour, improving family functioning, reducing stress and parent isolation, as well as increasing parent involvement in their child’s school and related activities. Parents reported an 8.33 ranking of liking FAST and supplemented this rating with enthusiastic comments:

- find it helpful to talk to other parents and team members about family issues
- helped me to communicate to my child and have more patience
- we have made new friends, have learned to deal with a few problems, found the FAST team to be very understanding and caring, helpful and encouraging
- made some good friends, re-inforced our family group
- enjoyed special play, the meal, break from the kids and sharing ideas with other parents
- helped us spend more time together as a family – feel more bonded
- feel more comfortable in approaching school personnel, talk more freely
- FAST helped me a lot, you realise you are not on your own, there are other people with the same problems and worries.

Table 6. Effectiveness & Achievement of FAST Program Goals.
Bibliographical References


National Crime Prevention, (1999) Pathways to Prevention: Developmental & Early Intervention Approaches to Crime in Australia, Attorney General’s Department, ACT.
