

Preparing Adolescent Immigrants Transition to Their New Environment: Addressing Mental Health and Occupational Participation

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this capstone project was to address the mental health and occupational participation needs of adolescent immigrants by providing education to caregivers and through the development and implementation of a life skills training program. The overall goal was to prepare this population as they transition to their new communities.

BACKGROUND

- About 45% of US children have experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) which can lead to negative health outcomes and affect the development of skills (Felitti et al., 1998; NSCH, 2016). ACEs could lead to trauma if protective factors are not available to mitigate these effects (Moore & Ramirez, 2016). Protective factors can be provided at the individual, familial, and community levels. Immigrant and refugee children are a vulnerable population, as they are likely to experience trauma before, during, and/or after migrating (Perreira & Ornelas, 2013). In 2020 there was a total of 30,557 unaccompanied alien children (UAC) apprehended by the US Border Patrol, which has continued to increase over the years (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2020).
- The engagement in meaningful occupations enhances an individual's overall health and well-being and contributes to one's identity (Gallagher et al., 2015; Trimboli & Taylor, 2016). Four main principles have been found regarding the meaning of occupations to immigrants, which include doing, being, belonging, and becoming (Gupta & Sullivan, 2013; Smith, 2015). Opportunities to engage in meaningful occupations has been found to promote overall well-being and help as immigrants' transition to a new country (Gupta & Sullivan, 2013; Smith, 2015).
- The purpose of life skills training is to increase an individual's participation in various activities including social, physical, intellectual, and creative activities, which promote overall well-being. (Abaoglu, Cesim, Kars, & Çelik, 2017). The development of skills required to engage in daily activities influences how well immigrants transition into their new country (Suleman & Whiteford, 2013). It also builds their self-confidence to actively engage within their environment and increase their occupational engagement and overall well-being (Gupta & Sullivan, 2008; Suleman & Whiteford, 2013).

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METHODS

St. Michaels Home for Children

St. Michael's Home for Children is a shelter providing care for unaccompanied immigrant adolescents detained by immigration officials. Most clients are from Central and South America between the ages of 13-17. Education was provided to staff members and caregivers about providing care for this population. A life skills training program was also developed and implemented with clients.

Providing Education

- A PowerPoint presentation was provided to educate staff members about the profession and the areas of needs that can be addressed.
- Educational handouts were created for both staff members and families discussing the importance of creating a safe environment for clients. Techniques that can be utilized by caregivers were also included in the handouts.

Needs Assessment

- A needs assessment was completed in order to identify the organization's current areas of need to better serve this population.
- Interviews were completed with 8 staff members from various service areas to gain an understanding of services already being provided.
- Surveys for both the staff and clients were utilized to gain a better understanding of which skills areas would be most beneficial to include in the life skills program.

Program Development, Implementation, & Evaluation

- 10 life skills training modules were created with the mentorship from staff members.
- 7 of the 10 modules were implemented with clients during 1-hour sessions
- Process evaluation
 - Attendance was tracked for each session
 - Client satisfaction was evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale survey at the end of each session
 - Assessment of knowledge was evaluated using short quizzes at the end of each session or by skilled observation during the completion of activities.
- Summative evaluation
 - Training on how to facilitate each module was provided to staff members
 - A 5-point Likert scale survey for staff was used to evaluate the sustainability of the program and to determine if the clients' needs were met.

RESULTS

- Attendance varied between each session as clients were frequently entering or leaving the shelter. However, all clients available during each session time was in attendance.
- Across all modules completed, clients reported they enjoyed the session (M=4.9), activities were beneficial (M=4.9) and discussions included were beneficial (M=4.8). Clients also reported they had a better understanding of each topic after participating in the sessions (M=4.9) and they believed they could use their new knowledge in the future (M=4.8). Lastly, clients reported all life skills topics included in the implemented modules were beneficial to them (M=4.9).
- On average clients scored above an 80% on all assessment of knowledge quizzes.
- More than 80% of clients demonstrated increased understanding through the completion of activities in module; however, only 64% demonstrated increased understanding during the activities completed in the Planning for the Future session.
- Staff members surveyed agreed that topics included in the binder were beneficial for the clients (M=5) and that the discussions and activities included were appropriate for each topic (M=4.5). They also reported modules were easy to follow (M=4.2) and are sustainable (M=4.5). All staff members reported the program partially met the clients needs (M=4).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Person Environment Occupation (PEO) Model

- This model consists of three constructs which include the person, the environment, and the occupation, all of which affect occupational performance (Law et al., 1996). Optimal occupational performance is achieved when all three constructs are working well together (Law et al., 1996).
- This model was used to guide the completion of this project as it allows for a holistic approach by analyzing all three constructs. During all aspects of the project, each construct was considered and analyzed in order to ensure the fit between each one was maximized to increase occupational performance.

The Attachment, Self-Regulation, and Competency (ARC) framework

- The ARC framework is an intervention program designed for working with children and adolescents who have experienced complex trauma (Kinniburgh, et al., 2017). Three core targets include attachment, self-regulation, and developmental competencies (Kinniburgh, et al., 2017). Interventions focus on promoting healthy attachment to caregivers, fostering a safe environment, improving self-regulation skills, and building development skills (Kinniburgh, et al., 2017).
- This framework guided the method in which services and interventions were provided during the completion of this project. Each core target was addressed through both education and the development and implementation of the life skills modules.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

- Though results from the evaluation demonstrate the life skills training modules were beneficial and effective, there are other factors that should be noted when evaluating the program. All clients always scored a 4 or a 5 on all questions on the satisfaction surveys, without fully considering the questions as it applied to each module. Additionally, other factors such as the duration of the clients at each shelter and situational circumstances may have impacted the client's ability to focus during the session and understand the topics.
- Overall, the completion of this project promoted mental health and healing through the education provided to staff. It also provided staff members with a program that can be utilized to increase client's occupational participation through life skills training. However, additional modules can be created to further meet this population's needs.

IMPLICATIONS

- The holistic approach of occupational therapy services is beneficial in this type of setting as it allows therapists to address multiple areas of needs that may impact this population's ability to engage in meaningful activities and their overall well-being.
- Through advocacy and collaboration with community members, occupational therapists can continue to expand the profession to meet the needs of this population through education and programming.
- The development and implementation of life skills training programs focused on meeting the needs of this population can address an area of need that may not be met in many shelters.