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Extension Professionals' Ever-Changing Roles when Working with At-Risk Clientele

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Abstract

Extension's role is to educate participants of its programs and measure impact upon clientele. While Extension professionals are educators, the at-risk clientele have many issues that supersede education. Therefore, a framework from which the Extension professional can operate in order to clarify roles and visualize outcomes for clientele is necessary. Extension professionals can use the Cooperative Extension At-Risk Service Model as this framework. This will assist them in moving clients to adopt improved practices while maintaining boundaries in the professional relationship.

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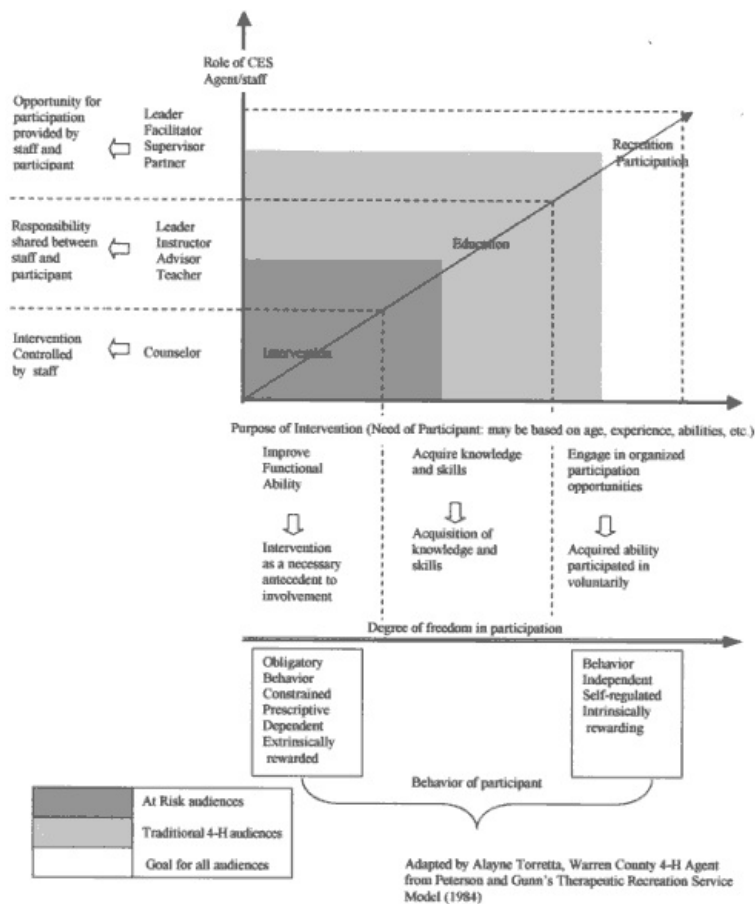
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Extension's role is to educate participants of its programs and measure impact upon clientele. In addition, Extension professionals are quite familiar with evaluating client satisfaction to improve and modify the program to increase client's satisfaction rating. However, when working to improve the skills of at-risk clientele, the professional faces the challenge of balancing what the clients want with what they need. Often these two extremes come into conflict with one another.

While Extension professionals are educators, the at-risk clientele have many issues that supersede education. How then does the educator create an environment that is conducive to learning, build a trusting relationship, and meet immediate needs that interfere with learning without exceeding the boundaries of the role of educator into the role of therapist?

A framework is necessary from which the Extension professional can operate. Figure 1 presents a helpful tool for the Extension professional in maintaining boundaries in the professional relationship with the clientele as well as understanding the various "roles" needed to move clients to adopt improved practices.

Figure 1.
Cooperative Extension At-Risk Service Model



How the Model Has Been Applied

The Children Youth and Families at Risk initiative in New Jersey has sponsored a Family Camp program for at risk families. Two of the goals of the camp are to increase communication among family members and to identify barriers to positive communication. Program evaluations revealed that both parents and youth would like more structured time apart.

At first glance, it seems a legitimate request to allow more time apart. After all, parents can learn a lot from and support each other, and peer support among teens can be a very positive experience. However, the goals of the program are to increase trust and communication skills among family members, something that many at-risk families report they struggle with on a daily basis and report that they are not comfortable interacting with each other for one reason or another.

After much discussion among Extension professionals who assisted with implementing the camp, it was stressed that the goals of the camp are family centered, and, because the camp is one weekend out of the year, it was decided not to structure future camps with "alone time" for parents and teens. The role of the Extension professional, in order to teach concepts of healthy communicating, is to assist with this uncomfortable skill-building exercise to forge positive changes within the family.

The Extension professional takes on a supportive, counseling role to assist family members in internalizing new concepts (Figure 1). The purpose of the program is to move the client from obligatory behavior that is extrinsically rewarding onto voluntarily, self-regulated intrinsically rewarding behavior. As clients acquire more skills and takes more responsibility for themselves, the role of the Extension professional shifts to that of advisor or leader and then eventually to that of facilitator or partner.

The Model

Intervention

Although the role of the Extension professional is "counselor" during the intervention stage, do not perceive this as in the traditional patient/doctor relationship. As a counselor, the professional has more control of the environment and the activity. At this stage, there is little input from the clientele as to which activity/lesson is used and how the activity will run. Based on a needs assessment, the professional chooses the appropriate lesson or activity that will most accurately meet clientele's needs.

For example, a mother who is in danger of losing a child due to parental negligence may be referred by a social service agency or the court to Extension-sponsored parenting classes to learn proper nutrition or discipline for her child. The mother may not be able to identify her needs, because she may see nothing wrong with her parenting style. In addition, accompanying the mother's lack of skills may be regret/guilt, low self-esteem, or much anger/blame. The Extension

professional can penetrate through these barriers using empathy and encouragement so that she can focus on the lesson at hand.

Empathy and encouragement are basic skills professional counselors use to initially build a working rapport with their clients. It is important to note that if a client cannot move to the next level to education after using an empathic approach, communication between the referring agency and Extension professional is crucial for providing the client with additional resources, such as a professional counselor or psychiatrist, in order to meet her basic needs before implementing prepared lessons.

Education

This is the realm where Extension professionals are traditionally most proficient. As that same mother begins to feel safe and trusts the Extension professional, she becomes open to new ways of tackling old and sensitive problems. She is more prepared to accept new information given to her during the prepared educational lessons. There are many effective curricula in the Extension system that improves parenting skills and family strengthening such as Strengthening Families program: For parents and youth 10-14 (Molgaard & Spoth, 1998), and Building Family Strengths (Thames & Thomason, 1999).

Recreation Participation

Effective and comprehensive programs go one step further to include a recreation participation portion, where participants can implement, under facilitated circumstances, newly learned skills. Such activities in this realm include the Family Memory Book (Torretta, 2003). It is important to note that the Extension professionals' role is to facilitate and supervise to assure that participants derive maximum benefits during the activity. Use of recreational activities for a desired outcome is the basic premise for the field of recreation therapy, which is the field that originated the Therapeutic Recreation Service Model.

Using loosely structured recreation activities provides the arena for practicing the concepts newly learned in the educational segments. According to Garbarino (2001), research on violence reduction programs show that successful programs combine cognitive restructuring with behavioral rehearsal.

Conclusion

It is important for Extension professionals to be aware of the role they assume when working with at-risk clientele in order to empower them to work towards an independent, contributing lifestyle. The Cooperative Extension At-Risk Service Model gauges clientele needs and assists professionals in visualizing where the clients are in the spectrum and where they are in relation to the desired outcome. What impedes the educational process is when the professional becomes "stuck" in a counseling role. He or she needs to step back and view the process in its entirety. This tool serves this purpose.

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