

## Aggression Replacement Training Uniting Networks for Youth evaluation highlights 2003-04

### Youth in trouble are often troubled youth

Previous research has found that:

- Youth in the juvenile corrections system have much higher rates of mental illness than other youth. One major study found that 53 percent had a diagnosable mental health disorder.
- At the same time, youth in the corrections system are less likely to receive help for their underlying problems than other youth.
- Youth with untreated mental health problems are likely to become repeat offenders.

These research findings, along with the fact that youth of color are greatly overrepresented in the juvenile justice system, point to the importance of treating delinquent youth for mental health problems using methods that are effective with youth of diverse cultural backgrounds.

### An approach based on evidence

Aggression Replacement Training is a research-tested method for helping youth break out of the cycle of violence and aggression. It is a short-term, intensive program of two to three sessions per week for 10 weeks. Based on sound psychological science about the ability to change thinking patterns and behavior patterns at the same time, Aggression Replacement Training combines three approaches:

- Skill streaming – Learning and practicing new ways to handle situations that can lead to trouble, like group pressure or someone picking a fight with you.
- Anger control – Learning a step-by-step method to stop an angry reaction and instead choose a problem-solving reaction.

- Moral reasoning – Learning to think with more maturity about situations, and to apply values like loyalty, honesty, and trust.

### Working with Ramsey County youth offenders

Since 2002, a collaborative group called Uniting Networks for Youth has been providing mental health treatment for young offenders who are likely to re-offend. (The collaborative has a four-year federal grant through Ramsey County Juvenile Probation.) The services are provided by experienced, ART-trained counselors from four community organizations:

Boys Totem Town  
Guadalupe Alternative Programs  
Juvenile Detention Center  
Wilder Community Assistance Program

### About the youth in ART

A total of 295 youth participated in Aggression Replacement Training from fall 2002 (when the program started) through fall 2004. Most of them entered the program at the recommendation of their probation officer or a judge's order. Most (77%) had at least one offense in the previous year.

This program is designed for youth who, unless they receive help, are likely to get into deeper trouble. Using a common tool for assessing the risk that youth will re-offend, probation officers rated 26 percent of the youth in this program at high risk, 54 percent at medium risk, and 20 percent at low-risk.

Two-thirds of these youth had already been through previous attempts to help them. Their troubles extended into other areas of their lives, such as serious conflict with parents (76% of the youth),

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repeated truancy (64%), failing grades in school (62%), being suspended from school (52%), chronic family poverty (57%), previous placement outside the home (55%), and endangering themselves or others (52%).

The youth were racially and culturally diverse (39% Black, 28% White, 24% Asian, 6% Latino, and 3% of another race or mixed race). Almost all (92%) were male. Most were between the ages of 14 and 17.

### **Amount and cost of services**

The youth in this program participated in an average of 21 sessions. Seventy-five percent of them successfully completed the program. The cost was under \$800 per participant. For comparison, the cost of 90 days in a correctional facility, without any mental health services, would be about \$14,000 per youth in Ramsey County. (This cost comparison is provided to illustrate that effective mental health treatment can be much less costly than sentencing youth to a correctional facility, not to imply that ART prevents a corrections placement for every youth who participates.)

### **Avoiding repeat offenses**

The primary goal of Uniting Networks for Youth is to prevent re-offenses – to help youth avoid a path of deeper and deeper trouble. Ramsey County records show that, while 77 percent of the youth had an offense in the year before they began Aggression Replacement Training, only 31 percent had an offense in the year after they participated. This is similar to the overall rate of re-offense among all Ramsey County youth, but there are some indications that the youth in Aggression Replacement Training are at higher overall risk for re-offending.

### **Staying in school**

Although a substantial number of these youth continue to have problems with school, such as truancy or suspension, the good news is that 80 to 90 percent were still in school three months after completing ART.

### **Youth report other benefits**

Three months after completing the program, 80 percent of youth say that Aggression Replacement Therapy made a difference in their life. Many commented that it helped them control their temper, avoid fights, and think before acting.

One significant indicator of this is the fact that for 36 of 39 skills taught in ART, the participants reported they were using the skills substantially more after the training than when they entered the program. (Examples would include standing up for one's rights in a nonviolent way, staying out of situations that could lead to trouble, and deciding which problem is most important to deal with first.)

### **How parents and youth rate the program**

Notably, nearly all parents (94%) said they would recommend this program to others who might need similar services.

Both parents and youth gave very high ratings to the quality of the group leaders who teach Aggression Replacement Training. Parents and youth also reported that the services were appropriate for their culture. This is a major goal of Uniting Networks for Youth, a multi-cultural collaborative serving a culturally diverse group of youth in Ramsey County.

### **For more information**

This summary presents highlights of the Uniting Networks for Youth 2003-04 evaluation report.

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