

Raphael House of Portland's Youth Program Evaluation Project

Project Background

Raphael House took part in Project Impact's 2015 Domestic Violence Providers Cohort, along with 12 other local domestic violence organizations. As a learning community, we worked together to design evaluation strategies designed to produce findings that demonstrate and improve impact. Raphael House's focus for evaluation was our Youth Program, with the goal of finding out *"What is the quality of Raphael House of Portland's Youth Program's impact?"*

After months of training and design, our staff implemented the evaluation through interviews with current and past participants and data analysis. Ten staff members conducted 19 interviews over the course of three months. The evaluation team consisted of program coordinators who attended the Project Impact meetings and dedicated time to building the protocol, drafting interview questions, and coordinating interviews.

Methodology

At the time of the interviews, each survivor either currently resided in our emergency shelter or was a past resident currently involved with the Advocacy Center or Housing Program. All interviewees were parents who had accessed the Youth Program either during their stay in shelter or through Advocacy Center programming.

We intentionally limited our survey set to discount survivors who had been in our program for less than 30 days, survivors who were exited from our programming due to safety concerns, and families whose children have never participated in Raphael House programming. Families residing in shelter under 30 days do not have enough engagement opportunities to formulate opinions about the program. Participants who were exited due to safety violations were not included to ensure safety of our staff. Additionally, survivors who did not have children in any of the programs were intentionally left out of the survey in order to gain information from survivors who had the opportunity to engage with our Youth Program in a meaningful way.

Unintentional limitations were not surprising, based on our experience with challenges that occur during other follow-up outreach to families. We could not interview survivors whose current contact information we did not have, some were not responsive to outreach, and others were scheduled but did not arrive for the interviews.

Interview appointments were held onsite at Raphael House, in the survivor's home, or in the community – wherever was most convenient for the participant. Childcare needs were accommodated and a \$10 gift card to Fred Meyer was used as an incentive to participate. Each interview included a qualitative analysis process and took up to three hours total.

An 18-question online quantitative survey that complemented the interviews was created with the expectation that these results would bolster the qualitative interview results. We sent an email with the survey link to all participants in our Advocacy Center database and also contacted families who participate in our Spanish-language Domestic Violence Support Group while they were onsite. Unfortunately, onsite participants were the only respondents, as no one responded to the online questionnaire. Therefore, we determined these qualitative survey responses to be an insufficient dataset.

The sample size would have been significantly smaller if it were not for Spanish bilingual staff members conducting interviews. This process required that they first translate the questions, rephrase those questions that may lose meaning in translation during the interviews, and offer clarification if needed. These interviewers translated each of the Spanish responses into English for data analysis.

Findings

The interviews revealed many themes. Besides the findings described below, additional themes included: a different awareness of *safety*; recognition of a new *community*; the need and ability for *self-care*; various methods of safely setting *boundaries* with self, children, and others; and a new way to communicate about and regulate *feelings* as a parent and for their children.

Finding #1: Respect is the foundation in which everything is allowed to grow

Description: The concept of respect runs deep through the lives of the survivors and their children who have come through Raphael House and its programs. For many, respect is the foundation in which everything is allowed to grow. We know and often speak about how hard it can be to live in a community with other trauma survivors. What we realize now is that our programs may foster not only a space to plant seeds of respect but also one in which adult and youth participants grow and learn from one another. We talk often about respectful communication in our programs, and now we realize how that concept has permeated the lives of survivors, going well beyond communication alone.

Interview Quotes: Interviews included notions of:

- Parents respecting children: "I have always made a commitment to love and respect my kids."
- Children respecting parents: "They have more respect and admiration and are more bonded with me."
- Participants respecting participants: "My daughter learned how to be respectful, set boundaries, and respect other people's boundaries."
- Between staff and participants: "At the shelter I always felt from you all to be very loving, patient, and supported. Despite if there was energy that did not belong there sometimes, I always felt respected."
- Respect in their relationships moving forward: "Not letting others hurt me, putting my foot down, and knowing I deserve respect."

Significance: The finding of respect is important to our agency because many abusive and unhealthy relationships rely upon the absence of respect. It highlights for us how important it is to keep this notion an ever-present discussion in our programs. It is also significant because this data shows how respect is crucial to success within a family unit and the ways in which our staff are successfully modeling respectful communication and behavior.

Finding #2: Cultivating commitment fosters hope

Description: Engagement with Raphael House helps fortify survivors' sense of commitment to themselves and their children, and in creating a safer future as a family. Survivors express and demonstrate this evolving and enhanced sense of commitment in various ways. For the survivors we serve, commitment begins with love for self. The self-care that survivors were encouraged to practice in shelter and through programming in the Advocacy Center was often highlighted as ultimately allowing them to be calm, patient, and present with their children. This enhanced their feelings of confidence in their parenting and in their sense of security and safe attachment within the family.

Interview Quotes:

- Practicing self-care and compassion is fundamental for survivors, and many noted that Raphael House provided the space and opportunities for that engagement: "The way I take care of myself has changed in a good way."
- Many survivors we spoke with expanded on how commitment to oneself bolstered commitment to their children: "If I'm not all the way there, it affects them."
- Survivors also said that Raphael House was a place where families began spending more and more enjoyable time together. "I spend more time with my kids now. It's like I don't want them to be away now."

Significance: Cultivating commitment ultimately fosters hope. Raphael House is invested in authentic and genuine relationship building between staff and survivors accessing our services. These connections promote open communication and collaboration related to personal engagement in self-identified goals towards a safer future for each family. When survivors commit to taking care of themselves, they commit to be present for their children, to persevere through challenging times, and to seek a better and safer future.

Finding #3: Their hope is our hope

Description: Raphael House strives to nurture hope and our findings indicate that we excel in this capacity. Many survivors who participated in the interviews related feeling hopeful in a general sense, as well as in more nuanced discussions about breaking the cycle of violence for themselves and their children. They attributed these feelings of hopefulness as a result of increased sense of self-worth, confidence, and resiliency and continued support generated by engaging with Raphael House staff and programming. Engagement with Raphael House prompted greater feelings of self-worth and optimism that not only is safety possible but it is deserved. There were resounding exclamations that the cycle of domestic violence could and would end.

Interview Quotes: To understand the impact Raphael House staff and services have on the hopefulness of survivors, it was important to explore how survivors felt before and after engaging with our programs:

- “Before coming here, I felt hopeless, anxious, sick, and drained emotionally.”
- “Being at Raphael House, there was so much support. I began feeling vitalized [with a] positive outlook on my life.”

Survivors also frequently spoke about how their mindset about deserving safety transformed and how that change would positively impact the lives of their children:

- “I know that how we are now is going to help them make good choices later.”
- “I’m so glad I’m able to teach my [children] that they deserve better – that they have a right to safety and respect.”

Significance: These findings were important for our agency, as so much of the intent for the support we provide is to inspire hope in the lives of the survivors we serve. Through our relationships and affirmations, and through modeling and offering resources related to respect and safety, we are transforming the vision survivors have for their futures to be better and safer.

Finding #4: Communication is a key component

Description: Communication is the key to better understanding where others are coming from, and to express and navigate emotions. Communication is another element that may be restricted for people who have fled abusive relationships. Communication is often impacted by isolation, whether it is the abusive parent interfering between the other parent and their child(ren), or by isolating the survivor from getting advice and support from other adults.

Interview Quotes: Interviewees reflected on their thoughts about communication outside of the abusive environment:

- “Learning to work as a team (and) better communication open up doors that have been closed for years. I used to not listen to them (children), and yell a lot; I’m learning to be more open-minded and to listen to them.”
- “Communication, no matter what. I feel that there is more unity between us. We are more connected. We are more collaborative as family and we are happy and free.”

Significance: Communication is paramount to effectively understanding each other’s point of view, to know what elicits an emotional response in an individual survivor, and to learn about each person’s response to traumatic events. When families come into our shelter, we often see that everyone is trying to get their needs met, but the impact of abuse and trauma can interfere with healthy family connections and communication. A child may do something that provokes a negative response from their parent, such as screaming, crying, and being unable to express what is going on.

In turn, the parent triggers the child by yelling, raising their voice, or expressing frustration. This finding highlights the importance of continued work around communication skills and recognizing and expressing feelings.

Finding #5: Family bonds are the core and foundation

Description: Over and over again in our interviews with parents, we heard about the importance of the bonds they have with their children as a family. A focus on communication, especially related to talking about feelings, as well as spending time together was identified as helping to build stronger family bonds.

Interview Quotes: Survivors expressed that their bonds had often been strengthened during and after their shelter stay and through continued involvement with Raphael House programming in the Advocacy Center.

- "I tell my kids the most important thing is our relationship."
- "Since we arrived, I feel more united with my family. Our bond had been strengthened, fortified. We have become so much more attached to each other."
- "We learned to know each other better. Being together as a family is the best."

Significance: Survivors expressed having the time, space, and energy to recommit their focus on their shared relationship with their child(ren), due to being in a safe place, away from violence. We know that domestic violence can impact attachment between the safe parent and their child(ren). We also know that having a secure attachment with a safe parent is one of the most important pieces to building resiliency for children who have been exposed to trauma. By maintaining a staff that prioritizes the importance of nurturing the family bond and the skills, time, and support needed to build safe lives, families can move from trauma to secure attachment.

Finding #6: Parents guiding their families in loving, learning, and growing together

Description: During our interviews we asked participants about changes in their identity, approach, and skills related to parenting since interacting with Raphael House. They spoke about using new parenting skills and techniques revolving around communication with their children. This often involved recognizing feelings, exercising patience, taking breaks or space during stressful situations, and speaking collaboratively with their children about problems and solutions.

Interviewees talked about how increased feelings of safety, calm, and confidence improved their ability to parent the way they wanted to: being in a space both physically and emotionally where they could let their kids be kids, moving away from acting out of guilt or anger, and being able to enjoy time together as a family. Some participants also noted an openness to recognizing past mistakes and to trying new things. The exposure to different parenting styles and skills, both from watching other families in the shelter community and from staff modeling, was highlighted as positively impacting their own parenting.

Interview quotes: Many participants identified how they are parenting now as a departure from their own past experiences, both parenting and being parented themselves as children.

- "I want to do things for my kids that my mother wasn't able to do for me. It's built me into a better mother and a better person."
- "We both learned coping skills. We learned the importance of how to not respond in anger or out of guilt or frustration."
- "If I feel safer and stronger, and have confidence in myself, I am going to model that for children and they are then going to be safe and strong."
- "I now take more time with my kids and don't lose my temper as much. I have more insight after coming here. I have techniques and ideas around other parenting styles. If I hadn't given myself time here, I wouldn't be who I've become."

Significance: We know that learning about parenting and child development and supporting social emotional skills are some of the important factors in nurturing resiliency in children that have experienced trauma. We also know that coercive control tactics focused on parenting often result in the survivor's role as a parent being diminished. In recognizing the damage that has been done to each of the survivors in a family and approaching the family as a whole, Raphael House Youth Advocates help parents navigate the various messages they have received over time and the examples set in shelter to find the safest and most appropriate approach for their family.

Implications

The evaluation proved that our Youth Program is making a difference in the lives of the children and parents with whom they interact. Raphael House will continue to emphasize the importance of this program as a core component of our service delivery system and will continue to bolster a family-centered approach as the best means to work with families who have experienced domestic violence.

Families found *home*, *safety*, and the *strength* of each other after engaging with the Youth Advocacy Team, and by accessing resources through the Advocacy Center. Supporting families through crisis, and making continued resources available while they are rebuilding, sets these survivors up for a brighter future.

Reflections on the Domestic Violence System

This evaluation project has emphasized that Raphael House's strength as an emergency shelter with supportive services offered in the Advocacy Center lies in our ability to build safe relationships with families who have been traumatized by an unsafe yet significant person in their lives.

Children are often left out of the discussion of domestic violence services, and mentioned even less is the impact our services can have in rebuilding positive family attachments. Family relationships are often strained by domestic violence, and by valuing youth and adult needs equally we can focus on supporting and strengthening the bonds and

attachment within these relationships. Raphael House's approach to family-centered advocacy for survivors includes:

- Balanced case management with child and adult survivors both as individuals and together as families.
- Communication, coordination, and collaboration between youth- and adult-focused case managers.
- Providing family- and teen-friendly spaces throughout the shelter and Advocacy Center.
- All direct-service staff have the training and skills to help heal and strengthen parent, child, and sibling relationships.
- Consideration of cultural values and practices related to parenting, discipline, and mental health within families.
- All direct-service staff are trained in nonviolent discipline strategies and skills to support parents.

Survivor families often have traumatic experiences which cause them to dismiss, fear or mistrust us, and be very protective of each other. Yet, over the time they spend in the shelter, they often allow themselves to trust us and are able to rebuild attachments to each other. Our trauma-informed and family-centered approach positions us as more than a shelter from crisis – also as a nurturing environment in which children and families can be successful, thrive, and build a better future.