



Parents' perceptions of juvenile probation: Relationship and interaction with juvenile probation officers, parent strategies, and youth's compliance on probation



Sarah Vidal ^{a,*}, Jennifer Woolard ^b

^a Yale University School of Medicine

^b Georgetown University

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 December 2015

Received in revised form 26 April 2016

Accepted 26 April 2016

Available online 27 April 2016

Keywords:

Parent strategies

Parental involvement

Delinquency

Probation

ABSTRACT

In the past several years, there has been a growing movement toward family-driven initiatives in many child-serving agencies, including the juvenile justice system. These initiatives underscore the importance of parental involvement in successful rehabilitation of at-risk and offending youth and highlight the unique role of parents to influence and inspire their child's behavior. Despite a growing consensus on the importance of parental involvement in juvenile justice processes, little empirical research has explored the nature of parental involvement in the juvenile justice system. This study examined parents' ($n = 87$) perceptions of relationship quality and interaction with probation officers, parenting strategies, and how these factors related to youth's compliance on probation. Findings revealed that parents generally had positive relationships with probation officers characterized as supportive, fair, respectful, and helpful toward youth. Most parents also employed practices such as use of reminders and encouragement to promote youth's compliance on probation. Parents' perceptions of probation officers' helpfulness toward youth were associated with decreased use of parenting practices that encourage probation compliance. However, parents' perceptions of supportive, respectful, and fair relationships with probation officers were associated with increased use of parenting practices that promote probation compliance. Supportive, fair, and respectful relationships with probation officers were also linked to fewer counts of technical violations of probation, but not new delinquent offenses, among offending youth. Implications for research, practice, and policy around the potential of collaborative relationships between parents and probation officers in facilitating successful probation outcomes are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the past several years, there has been a growing movement toward family-driven initiatives in many child-serving agencies, including the juvenile justice system. These initiatives underscore the importance of parental involvement in successful rehabilitation of at-risk and offending youth (Pennell, Shapiro, and Spigner, 2011; Gavazzi, Yarcheck, Rhine, and Partridge, 2003; Davies and Davidson, 2001) and highlight the unique role of parents to influence and inspire their child's behavior (Bandura, 1969; Burgess and Akers, 1966). For example, juvenile courts increasingly involve families in rehabilitation interventions with at-risk and offending youth (Pennell et al., 2011; Gavazzi et al., 2003; Davies and Davidson, 2001). Yet surprisingly, we know more

about family involvement from research with juvenile justice professionals than parents themselves (Maschi, Schwalbe, and Ristow, 2013; Peterson-Badali and Broeking, 2009, 2010). In this study, we addressed this gap in the literature by investigating how parents' perceptions of juvenile probation officers combine with their own parenting strategies affect their child's compliance with conditions of probation, the disposition rendered in approximately two-thirds of adjudicated delinquency cases (Sickmund, Sladky, and Kang, 2015).

2. Parental involvement in juvenile probation: importance and challenges

Ample empirical evidence supports the belief that parents can protect against antisocial and delinquent behaviors. For example, parental support (e.g., care and warmth), authoritative parenting styles (e.g., balancing demand and responsiveness), and engaged parenting practices (e.g., active monitoring and supervision) predict lower risk of associations with antisocial peers, substance use, and delinquency

* Corresponding author at: Division of Prevention and Community Research, Department of Psychiatry, Yale University School of Medicine, 389 Whitney Ave., New Haven 06511, CT, United States.

E-mail address: sarah.vidal@yale.edu (S. Vidal).

(Hoeve et al., 2009; Steinberg, Blatt-Eisengard, and Cauffman, 2006; Dorius, Bahr, Hoffman, and Harmon, 2004; Baumrind, 1991). Parents, thus, are integral in facilitating successful outcomes, particularly among court-involved youth (Burke, Mulvey, Schubert, and Garbin, 2014).

Indeed, according to the *participation process model of probation* (Schwalbe, 2012), parental support and involvement are one of three key components to the theory of change underlying probation, alongside youth-probation officer relationships and youth motivational processes. Parental involvement in probation may manifest in three ways – as service recipient, as child advocate, and as compliance monitor (see Burke et al., 2014). First, parents may receive services simultaneously with the youth. Tanenhaus (2002) suggests that “the [youth] not only brought the state into his or her life, but also opened up the family home to state intervention and extended supervision [when they are placed on probation]” (pp. 53–54). Courts often mandate evidence-based programs such as Multisystemic Therapy (Henggeler, 2011), which by their design require significant parental participation (Brank, Kucera, and Hays, 2005). Second, parents may advocate for the needs and welfare of their child with a variety of professionals (Burke et al., 2014). They may negotiate with the probation officer for the type of services they believe best fits their child’s needs. Finally, parents may enforce rules and extend services provided by the court. For example, parents may remind youth of probation rules, reinforce service requirements, and/or report violations to the probation officer. Juvenile probation officers depend on parents for information about the youth’s behavior and compliance with probation conditions (Maschi et al., 2013; Peterson-Badali and Broeking, 2009).

Recognizing that parents are critical to youths’ probation success, juvenile justice systems have begun proactively involving parents in all stages of processing (Davies and Davidson, 2001). For example, training manuals for juvenile justice officials include practices that support and promote parental involvement (Torbet and Griffin, 2002; Mullins and Toner, 2008). In some jurisdictions, parents are strongly encouraged to attend probation meetings (Maschi et al., 2013; Mental Health Association in Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers, 2009; Davies and Davidson, 2001). These efforts reflect the juvenile justice system’s recognition of the vital role of parents in facilitating a successful response of youth to court-ordered programs and services. However, the relationship between parents of offending youth and the juvenile justice system is complex, often fraught with many challenges.

Although one goal of the juvenile justice system is to promote rehabilitation by helping families, not all families experience system intervention as intended. First-time involvement can be stressful, confusing, and anything but positive (Osher and Shufelt, 2006; Osher and Hunt, 2002). Although parents may possess some basic understanding of how the system works, even experienced parents do not necessarily know how to successfully navigate the juvenile justice system (Woolard, Cleary, Harvell, and Chen, 2008). Moreover, some parents may view probation as an intrusive sanction, interfering with family affairs. That view may be reinforced by perceptions (or the reality) that system officials blame parents for their child’s misbehavior (Brank and Scott, 2012). Thus, supportive services are essential for parents to alleviate the complexities of navigating the juvenile justice system and promote the successful rehabilitation of their child.

3. Parent-juvenile probation officer relationship: a critical factor in the juvenile probation process

Juvenile probation officers have a complex and challenging role of monitoring progress and compliance with probation, and promoting rehabilitation and accountability among offending youth. Probation officers also typically develop working relationships with parents and serve as parents’ primary connection with the court. Positive working relationships may help promote positive behavioral changes among

youth and support probation compliance. For example, probation officers employ several strategies to facilitate parental involvement in probation, including listening empathetically, building trust, providing emotional support, and including parents in case planning and management (Maschi et al., 2013). If these strategies foster a supportive, fair, and respectful relationship, parents may be more willing to work constructively with probation officers, which in turn increases the chance of youth’s compliance. To date that hypothesis remains untested, but research from related fields supports its utility.

Procedural justice research, for example, suggests that individuals who trust the legal system and view it as fair are more likely to see laws as legitimate and cooperate with legal decisions (Tyler, 1990; Tyler and Jackson, 2013). Extrapolating those findings to juvenile probation, we suggest that the nature of parent-officer relationships may encourage parents to proactively help their children comply with probation conditions. When parents feel they are respected and treated fairly by the probation officers they can partner with the probation officer to promote positive behavioral changes in the youth. When parents feel their voices are heard, they may also feel empowered to actively participate in case planning and management efforts (Pennell et al., 2011; Hillian and Reitsma-Street, 2003). Thus, the extent to which parents perceive their relationships with probation officers as supportive, fair, and collaborative may encourage partnership with juvenile justice professionals and effective parental authority to promote compliance among offending youth.

However, parents and probation officers encounter significant challenges to developing and maintaining positive relationships. Two qualitative studies document that parents of offending youth find the probation process particularly challenging when justice system professionals, including probation officers, communicate inadequately and provide support inconsistently (Osher and Shufelt, 2006; Hillian and Reitsma-Street, 2003). Poor relationships with probation officers can create ambiguity about the probation process and inhibit parents from acquiring services for their child (Osher and Shufelt, 2006). Such problems can create a cycle in which the more challenging that probation becomes, the more likely it is that parents might disengage or undermine the process. On the other hand, parents experience probation as a positive intervention when juvenile justice professionals provide consistent support and follow through on their commitments. Consistent with procedural justice theories, parents appreciate probation officers’ efforts to support and encourage the family during a crisis even if no concrete solution to the problem is identified (Hillian and Reitsma-Street, 2003).

4. Parent and youth characteristics: predictors of parents’ contact and relationship quality with probation officers

The limited studies focusing on parents’ experiences with the juvenile justice system have shed some light on the challenges they experience when their child is involved with the juvenile justice system (Cook, 2013; Cook and Gordon, 2012). These studies suggest that lack of communication and consistent support may influence how parents interact with juvenile justice professionals and the extent to which they engage and participate in programs and services. However, we know little about other factors that could influence parents’ experiences and involvement in juvenile justice processes.

Parents’ perceptions of the legal system might be shaped by how the system has treated them as individuals and how well the system has met their family’s needs. Research suggests that individual and situational characteristics relate to how a person perceives their experiences with the legal system (Rodriguez, Smith, and Zatz, 2009; Leiber and Mack, 2003). Theories of legal socialization posit that the orientation, perceptions, and beliefs of an individual toward the legal system are shaped by direct personal experiences or indirect vicarious experiences with the courts, police, and other legal actors (Fagan and Tyler, 2005). Thus, parents may be positively or negatively predisposed toward justice system officials based in part on their previous experiences with

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