



Adam Sternberg and Gloria Sanchez offer Functional Family Therapy – an evidence-based practice for youth with a proven track record in reducing violent behavior and increasing academic success.

Healthy, Happy Youth

Sometimes the key to changing behavior is seeing things from a different perspective. That's what the Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic's Functional Family Therapy (FFT) program strives to do for at-risk youth ages 10 to 18 and their families.

Founded in 1972, nationwide FFT has demonstrated significant and long-term reductions in youth violent behavior and re-offending, low drop-out and high education completion rates, as well as improved family communication.

The Clinic's FFT team strives to help each family member view their issues as a reflection of a larger dynamic—rather than continue blaming the adolescent or each other. “We ask all family members to change the way they think and to see one another in a different light,” notes Adam Sternberg, Ph.D., the Clinic's FFT Coordinator.

FFT is designed around short-term intervention strategies. Families participate in anywhere from six to 24 sessions at home.

The first phase seeks to prepare the family to make positive changes, both as individuals and as a group. Up for discussion are such shared issues as communication, anger management, trust, and problem-solving. “We don't come in with a pre-determined treatment plan,” explains FFT Therapist Gloria Sanchez, LMFT. “We get to know a family's strengths first, then work from that basis.”

FFT also assumes that family members have “noble intent”—that

they want to accomplish something positive for someone else. For example, a mother who constantly repeats instructions to her teen may be praised for caring—so the teen can see the motive behind the behavior.

In phase two, the family crafts a plan to put new traditions into place, such as a family night or other common activities. During the final phase, family members discuss how they might apply their new-found skills in the future.

In the FFT Program, opportunities for change can come at any time. Ms. Sanchez appreciates what she calls the “We Moment” —when a family's conversation moves away from “He did that” to “We can do this together.” Then, she says, “I know they can begin building from there.”

Another Clinic program—the Life Learning Program—supports adolescents and young adults, ages 15-25, who are receiving mental health services. A multi-disciplinary staff assists clients in pursuit of higher educational goals, independent living skills, and job searches.



Life Learning clients who face substance abuse issues have an added resource, thanks to the Clinic's partnership with Behavioral Health Services (BHS), a community-based organization that provides prevention and recovery counseling.

Iris Leary, MA, a certified addictions counselor with BHS, counsels the young adults on strategies for recovery and harm reduction. “You never know when someone will be willing to make a major change,” she says. “I meet them where they are with honesty, sincerity and understanding. Showing I have empathy without judgment allows me to gain their trust—one step at a time.”



“Early diagnosis and adequate treatment provided in an integrated service system is very effective; California can do a better job saving lives and saving money by making a firm commitment to providing timely, adequate mental health services.”

— California Mental Health Services Act of 2004