

A Literature Distillation:
Topics Related to Developing the Lions Quest 12-Week
Substance Use Prevention Program

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INTRODUCTION

At the request of Lions Clubs International, and as part of a larger program evaluation project, the Center for Drug and Health Studies conducted a literature review to inform the development of the 12-week Lions Quest (LQ) program targeting community-based substance use prevention for students of all ages. It will also inform future evaluation and research studies intended to improve the program and provide a rigorous research base for the purposes of becoming an evidence-based program. It will also inform logic model modifications and development in the future.

Several key elements related to the program were targeted in the literature review: Lesson facilitators, parents, community-based setting, substance-use prevention, program readiness, and program implementation. Key terms associated with each topic were used to search for literature. In addition, when a robust publication was found, its reference list was used to identify new leads. In total, more than 50 publications were examined, though 35 were sufficiently relevant to be included in this distillation of the literature.

The literature distillation is organized by topic. For each topic, a summary of research findings is described, many of which align with elements that are already part of the LQ program in some fashion, as well as recommendations. Some recommendations are about what is important for the implementation sites to consider, while others are directed toward the LQ leadership. The report ends with concluding comments addressing future directions.

Lesson Facilitators

Lesson facilitators are those individuals who lead programming with groups of participants. The focus here was on programming for school-age children k-12.

What are the characteristics of effective lesson facilitators?

1. Confidence and comfort implementing the program [1] [2] [3]
2. Believe in and value the program and its goals, buy-into the program, program aligns with their philosophy [4] [2] [5] [6] [7] [8]
3. Having a reasonable level of social and emotional competency [9]
4. Mental health professionals, counselors, and peers, in that order, are effective [10] [11]
5. Facility with group process and facilitation, ability to direct a group without being dominating, having tolerance for ambiguity and the ability to empower students to make good choices [10] [3]

What facilitator needs are important to meet for lessons to be effective?

1. Administrative support from organizational leadership [1] [12]
2. Addressing issues around professional burnout, such as emotional exhaustion, feeling limited personal accomplishment [13] [1]
3. Effective training to implement the program, referring to quality and quantity, to include opportunities to practice in a real setting with real time feedback [2] [7] [1]

4. Ongoing support, coaching, mentoring, facilitator groups; could involve trainers, coaches, peers, administrators; occurs regularly, provides opportunities for question and answer, includes lesson observations and feedback, and opportunities to discuss their implementation [1] [5] [8] [14]

Recommendations

General

- Given the important role lesson facilitators play in program delivery, they should be selected carefully to ensure they have the necessary skills, experience, and attributes that will improve the likelihood they will be able to implement the lessons with fidelity and connect effectively with program participants. Provide additional training to lesson facilitators who may be lacking in these desired skills, experiences, and attributes.
- Ensure administrative support that includes concrete plans to prevent burnout by monitoring lesson facilitators and providing relief opportunities, peer support groups, and other supports, as needed.

Lions Quest

- Provide lesson facilitators comprehensive professional development and training in Lions Quest lesson implementation that includes real-time practice opportunities and coaching with feedback, as well as ongoing coaching and support opportunities throughout implementation.

Parents and Guardians

Parents and guardians are those adults who are responsible for the care and upbringing of the children participating in the program.

What type of parent behavior and involvement in substance use prevention programming contributes to program effectiveness?

1. Keep parents informed of the programs being offered and that their children are participating in [5]
2. Direct parent participation in substance use prevention programs with or without their children and other family members [15] [16]
3. Establish good relationships between program staff and participants' parents and guardians [17]
4. Parental monitoring of children's behavior out of school, which could include supervision, tracking, and communication [18] [19]

Recommendations

- Keep parents and guardians informed about the Lions Quest program their children are participating in and work to establish relationships with them.
- In addition to engaging parents and guardians in Lions Quest program elements already established, consider adding elements that teach parents the importance of monitoring their children and communicating with them along with training in how to do these things, or direct them to where they can get the necessary training.

Community-Based Setting

A community-based setting is a location within the local community where a program is implemented, such as a community center, religious institution, boys and girls club, and the like, but is typically not a school.

In what ways can a community-based setting contribute to the successful implementation of a substance use prevention program for students?

1. They support greater parental involvement and monitoring, and parental skill development which are considered protective factors against substance use. [20] [19] [16]
2. They can be more personalized and target the needs of a local community (eg. specific racial or ethnic groups, students with specific disorders), so they need not seek support outside of their community. [21] [22] [23] [24] [25]
3. They offer networking benefits such as stronger implementation support from organizations they have been working with for some time, care that takes place at home, school, and during extracurricular activities, and overlapping coordinated care. [8] [26]
4. Resources can be pooled across the community including funds, volunteers, community member engagement [27] [28]
5. Associated challenges: too many different interests trying to direct the program and political pressures [2]

Recommendations

- Given the potential benefits of implementing Lions Quest in community-based settings from the planning phase through evaluation, strive to maximize them by engaging diverse community representatives and resources that can support the program directly and peripherally, as well as help identify the most pressing needs around substance use so appropriate program adaptations can be made.

Program Readiness

Program readiness is the capacity for the site/community hosting the youth program to do so effectively through all phases of the process – planning, training, implementation, and evaluation.

What are important readiness elements and what characterizes readiness to implement a substance use prevention program?

1. Assess community readiness for substance use program implementation and include stakeholders and potential partners in this process, then address any issues that could inhibit implementation [12] [8]
2. Understand the community and the history of its substance use problem, previous efforts to address it, the barriers to participation they encountered, and the cultural and ethnic characteristics of the community [12]

3. Select a program that matches availability of resources and can be implemented successfully, as opposed to one that may be considered better, but beyond their capacity – realistic expectations [2] [29]
4. Develop a logic model and an implementation plan describing how the program will be implemented in detail, who is responsible for which elements, and plans to evaluate the program’s effectiveness over time [12]
5. Develop a monitoring and evaluation plan including elements that align with the logic model and address important contextual and program processes and outcomes (eg. facilitator training and comfort implementing the program, participant engagement, stakeholder buy-in, participant outcomes, implementation quality) [4] [2] [30] [29] [8]
6. General support and buy-in from stakeholders, administrators, program leaders and lesson facilitators who support innovation, creativity, or change [13] [7] [12] [8] [26] [31]
7. Quality professional development and training for those implementing the program, which includes those delivering the lessons to participants and those involved more peripherally who comprise the broader community [4] [12]
8. Networks - Extensive formal and informal relationships and connections as described in the Community-Based Setting section [8]
9. Facilitator characteristics and support as detailed in the Lesson Facilitator section [13] [9] [8]

Recommendations

General

- Involve diverse stakeholders in assessment, selection, and planning for program implementation making sure to maintain realistic expectations and work within their capacity.
- Create a clear, useful, and comprehensive set of planning, implementation, and evaluation documents to facilitate common understandings among stakeholders and to serve as touchstones throughout the implementation process.

Lions Quest

- Provide a liaison from Lions Quest staff to serve as a resource and guide through the preparatory phases that include assessment, planning, networking, and training, to facilitate adequate readiness and site ownership of the process.

Program Implementation

Most broadly stated, implementation includes all aspects of preparing for program delivery, actual program delivery, monitoring and evaluation. Therefore, this section has some overlap with other sections.

What characterizes or facilitates successful program implementation?

1. As stated in other sections, lesson facilitator characteristics and training, parent involvement, community settings, and program readiness contribute to successful program implementation.

2. Program fidelity and quality, that is, implementing a program well and as intended, should be maintained as much as possible to attain the predicted impacts, since changes may diminish the desired results [2] [30] [12] [26]
3. Adapt the program to meet the unique needs and characteristics of the community, but do so intentionally, without removing core elements, before the program begins, and with help from experts. [2] [12]
4. Unplanned program changes (eg. unexpected missed sessions, facilitator error) should be examined and addressed to insure program effectiveness. [12]
5. Ongoing implementation support [12]
6. Implement monitoring and evaluation plan to provide process feedback and to determine program effectiveness across important program elements as detailed in the program logic model [4] [2] [12]

Recommendations

General

- Adaptations to the program, needed to meet community needs, should be made during the planning process, while retaining the core program elements and adhering as much as possible to the fidelity of the program. It is an important balance.
- Address unanticipated changes to planned implementation attempting to approximate, as closely as possible, the original plan.
- Implement monitoring and evaluation elements throughout the implementation process and when the program has been completed, so data can be used to support or modify program elements to better meet the needs of participants and other stakeholders, and to determine the extent to which the program has been successful.

Lions Quest

- Relax the rigidity of the Lions Quest lessons which are quite prescriptive. This will allow the professionals leading lessons to use their expertise to make adjustments needed to effectively meet the participant needs.

Substance Use Prevention Programming

Substance use prevention programming attempts to prevent the onset of substance use or limit the development of problems associated with the use of substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs.

What characterizes effective substance use prevention programming?

1. Involve parents/guardians and family members in programming or create programming just for parents [20] [16]
2. Developmentally relevant, engaging, non-judgmental, and confidential [32]
3. Interactive [7]
4. Long-term [33] [34]
5. Evidence-based and adapted for specific groups or community settings [3]

6. Implement programs with young children because they are more effective with children prior to exposure and experimentation [35] [23]
7. Effective with non-users to prevent or slow initial use [34] [32] [23] [19]

What program content shows evidence of effectiveness?

1. Myths about prevalence of substance use, challenges unrealistic beliefs about substance use, how to resist peer pressure, and benefits of resisting or reducing substance use [32]
2. Resistance skills training [32] [10] [35]
3. Broad-based life skills [10] [35]
4. Cooperative social skills and social and psychological skills [35]
5. Self-regulation and stress management [19]

Recommendations

General

- Implement substance use prevention programs with younger children when they are less likely to have been exposed to substances and can learn information about drug use and skills to resist it.
- Use programs that align with best delivery practices and content that has been shown to be effective, and implement them for extended periods of time with children and their families.

Lions Quest

- Consider reviewing the current programming to determine what elements may need modifying, removing, or adding to align with the latest research on substance use prevention programming for students and their families.

Concluding Comments

The Lions Quest program and its materials are impressive and include many of the best practices described in the literature. There are, however, some areas that would benefit from a close examination with any eye toward improvement, based on the literature. These were provided in the recommendations above. There may be others that make sense, as well, and Lions Quest leadership is in the best position to take a closer look give their thorough understanding of the program.

While critical topics were included in this literature review, there are additional topics that could shed light on changes that may need to be made to the Lions Quest program and its materials. A close look at substance use prevention at different age levels would be informative, despite the literature supporting programming for younger children. Programming remains important and necessary for children who have already been exposed to substance use. In addition, given the new focus on virtual program delivery as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring the literature in that area and getting experts involved will increase the chances of program success. Steps have already been taken to do this by bringing Dr. Mark Van Ryzin on board as an expert in virtual program delivery.

Future research and evaluation for Lions Quest could include looking closely at different types and levels of adaptations made to the program to determine what is effective for whom under what conditions. It could also include studies of lesson facilitator variability in terms of their characteristics, background,

skills, and attributes for the same reasons. These studies would inform the Lions Quest leadership of which adaptations are indeed effective, and how best to select and train lesson facilitators going forward. The same approach can be taken to examine the training, coaching, and ongoing support provided to lesson facilitators to determine what is most effective.

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