



RESEARCH AND EXTENSION

PROGRAM UPDATES AND HIGHLIGHTS

OPEN-K Opportunities for Prevention Education and Networking in Kansas

SITUATION

Kansas youths are like other youths across the United States. They are vulnerable to increased pressures and situations because of current and emerging changes in society. Such social changes include the increasing amount of information at varying degrees of quality and accuracy; lack of clear-cut boundaries and enforcement of those boundaries; changes in family composition and ways of living; and changes in community and world structures. The result is the continued need for youths to be supported in learning the skills they need so they can handle change successfully and become responsible citizens.

Sweeping social change and the devolution of traditional structures can create challenges for youths, their families, and communities. Fortunately, most youths will probably thrive even in the face of these challenges because they have positive social skills, competencies, and supportive families and communities. However, some youths will find the challenges—blended with their own normal anxieties about growing up—unmanageable. These youths may be at risk or vulnerable to such problems as teen pregnancy, delinquency, substance abuse, dropping out of school, and violence. Kansas families and communities have taken note of these problems.

The 1999 Kansas Kids Count Data book (Kansas Children's Service League) reports that:

- Substantiated reports of child abuse and neglect have increased dramatically in Kansas. These increases reflect greater family mismanagement and harm to children. We must be focused on preventing child abuse and neglect, supporting the families who are most vulnerable to problems and intervening early when child maltreatment is evident.
- Reductions in childhood poverty are not being achieved despite a sustained period of economic growth in Kansas. Seventeen percent of Kansas children live in poverty. In Wyandotte County alone, one out of every three children live below the poverty line.

- From the 1997 Kansas data, we learn that 6.9 percent of births were low-birth-weight babies compared to 6.1 percent in 1985. Though slight, this increasing rate means an even greater number of children will be predisposed to a variety of neuro-developmental disorders, weakened health, and negative outcomes. Of additional concern is the likelihood that the majority of these babies come from families—many of whom are single, teenaged mothers—who lack adequate health care, finances, and management skills.
- Like other states, Kansas continues to report decreasing rates of serious youth crime. Much of the decrease can be attributed to new policing methods, greater numbers of incarcerated violent youth offenders, and even the passage of the “population bulge” of young men of crime-prone age. What’s confounding is the fact that juvenile court filings are up in Kansas. One reason could be the behaviors of novice youth offenders along with the community’s “no nonsense” response to offenses. Because of the wide variances in report filings and crime trends across different counties, combined with a wide variety of juvenile offenses, more local analyses of the problem are necessary for the development of appropriate and realistic prevention efforts.

We must ask ourselves: Are Kansans doing a good job of raising and caring for all children? If not, why not, and how can we improve the development of our Kansas youths to the benefit of families and communities? K-State Research and Extension seeks answers to these questions.



Education & Networking in Kansas

Opportunities for Prevention



Collaborating with groups such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, youth organizations, church groups, Boys and Girls clubs, schools, housing departments, and the Kansas Juvenile Justice Authority, K-State Research and Extension is marshaling the resources of its system to develop and deliver educational programs that equip youths with the skills necessary for them to be capable, contributing members of their families and communities.

OPEN-K (Opportunities for Prevention Education and Networking in Kansas)

Applying Prevention Science to Community-Based Positive Youth Development.

K-State Research and Extension's OPEN-K (Opportunities for Prevention Education and Networking in Kansas) initiative is grounded on research-based approaches of positive development for vulnerable youth and families. OPEN-K is based on capacity-building principles that create positive capacity in family, school, and community environments to help reduce the potential risks of problem behaviors in children and youths. This capacity building, which also enhances the child's own competencies and skills, will help to protect a child. For example, much like an immunization buffers a child from disease, a strong "dose" of effective parenting or positive social skills will help buffer Kansas children from an environment filled with academic failure, family mismanagement, or friends who engage in delinquency. OPEN-K, while working with state partners to reduce risks to children, primarily concentrates on building resiliency and protective factors in Kansas youths, families, and communities.

Housed in the K-State Office of Community Health, OPEN-K bridges to all aspects of research and extension. As part of the Youth, Family, and Community Development Core Mission Theme, OPEN-K supports the work of youth development in 4-H and Youth Programs alongside the interdisciplinary Expanded Opportunities/Models of Positive Youth Development Action Team.

OPEN-K first received funding in 1998 from K-State Research and Extension's federal partner, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), for the purpose of

increasing the capacity of K-State Research and Extension to enhance existing and implement new community-based youth development and prevention programs for vulnerable (i.e., at-risk for problem behaviors) children and youths.

To accomplish this capacity-building mission, OPEN-K has two objectives.

1. Improve the quality and quantity of community-based programs that prevent youths from engaging in risky behaviors.
2. Improve the capacity of K-State Research and Extension to implement—with community-based and state partner organizations—effective prevention and early intervention programs for vulnerable children, youths, and their families.

PROGRAMMING AND CAPACITY BUILDING FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Objective 1 is accomplished through a network of OPEN-K supported out-of-school programs for elementary aged children in Douglas, Scott, and Wyandotte counties. OPEN-K out-of-school programs (many of which are blending in components of a 4-H youth-development/club model) are working on achieving the eight critical elements required of an effective youth-development program. These eight elements, determined through a national 4-H/youth-development analysis of successful programs, involve:

- A positive relationship with a caring adult.
- A safe environment, both physically and emotionally.
- An opportunity for mastery of skills and competencies.
- An opportunity to value and practice service for others.
- An opportunity for self-determination.
- An inclusive environment.
- An opportunity to see one-self as an active participant in the future.
- Engagement in learning.

To help OPEN-K programs and communities achieve these necessary elements, Youth-At-Risk programs affiliated with the Finney, Pottawatomie, and Reno counties K-State Research and Extension offices provide mentoring to the OPEN-K out-of-school programs. Also, in the second year of the five-year initiative, OPEN-K programs have implemented the nationally recognized PATHS program that utilizes 4-H skill-building activities that can be evaluated by quantitative and qualitative methods.

PATHS

Identified by the Department of Justice and other national groups as a blueprint for reducing and preventing youth violence, PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) is a comprehensive program for promoting emotional and social competencies and reducing aggression and behavior problems in elementary school children. Research indicates that PATHS improves protective factors and reduces behavioral risk factors. Consequently, K-State OPEN-K, with partners from the Juvenile Justice Authority, SRS/Child Care Commission, and Ogden Elementary School/21st Century Community Learning Center, will implement and track PATHS' success in OPEN-K sites and other community-based youth organizations. Thus, OPEN-K not only builds the capacity of its out-of-school sites but strengthens the ability of Kansas agencies and K-State Research and Extension to implement research-based prevention and early intervention programs.

Professional development and training by computer technology are provided to the programming staff in three counties and their 17 community sites through OPEN-K. All OPEN-K programs, along with Youth-At-Risk sites, received computers, printers, software, and Internet connection as a means to build technology capacity of the site staff. After a series of OPEN-K coordinated training sessions, site staff began using computer technology to access quality youth-development information from the World Wide Web. They also learned to network and troubleshoot through Internet communication and use individualized learning software for children and youths. The OPEN-K Website <http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/pr_openk> also provides a focal point for the project, its staff, and internal and external partners. OPEN-K is rapidly becoming a center for an alliance of K-State Research and Extension faculty and partners involved in youth-development programming.

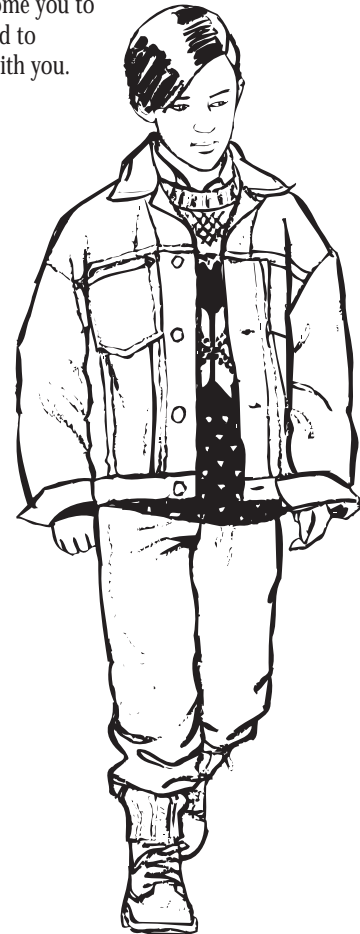
Objective 2 will be achieved in coordination with the K-State Research and Extension Action Team for "Preparing Youths to be Responsible Citizens Through Expanded Opportunities/Models of Youth Development" and the establishment of a comprehensive youth-development training institute for K-State Research and Extension professionals, paraprofessionals, and partners. The creation of the OPEN-K Institute will ultimately lead to a sustained system of building competent, vital, and thriving youth-development professionals across Kansas. First steps towards establishing the institute have begun with cooperation of the USDA-funded Army, School-Age, and Teen project, through the Army project's youth-development baseline training. OPEN-K is looking forward to blending the successes of the youth-development Army project and the work of risk-reduction and asset-building organizations in Kansas with a multistate Great Plains coalition that also has identified training for youth-development professionals as necessary. Training in evaluation, community development, and program planning/implementation also are planned for current K-State Research and Extension professionals who want to improve their skills but aren't committed to a youth-development specialization.

To begin capacity-building efforts, an OPEN-K listserv has been established. OPEN-K listserv <OPENK@oz.oznet.ksu.edu> is a virtual network of persons interested in prevention, early intervention, and youth development. It provides communication through the system of more than 200 community-based professionals and is a way to post information that might be helpful to communities.

A baseline of the K-State Research and Extension system has already been determined. With a 1998 Organizational Change Survey of Extension professionals and a similar 1999 survey of local Extension Executive Board members, OPEN-K begins its second year with a clear understanding of how the K-State Research and Extension system perceives its capacity to work effectively with vulnerable children, youth, and families.

THE VISION

OPEN-K works on behalf of Kansas children, youths, and family, and many new friends, colleagues, and organizations continue to "come-on-board." We are mobilized by the common vision for all children and youths to live in families and communities that promote their positive development. We welcome you to join us. We look forward to working and learning with you.





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For more information, please contact the K-State Research and Extension office in your county or district.

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