

Conocimiento Evaluation Update

Introduction

Conocimiento is an innovative program designed to build resilience among youth who have experienced trauma/adverse events with activities that work to strengthening preventive factors. This program is funded with Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) Innovation funding. Conocimiento is being carried out at two sites within the Cities of Santa Paula and Fillmore. Historically, high-risk youth from these two cities have had some tensions and conflict with one another based on long standing rivalry among the two high schools. In addition to building protective factors within youth, the program also works to foster positive relationships among youth in both cities.

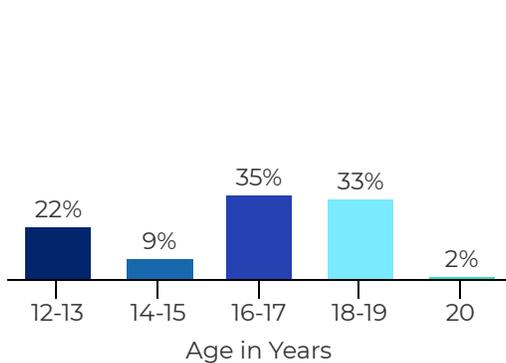
EVALCORP was contracted by Ventura County Behavioral Health (VCBH) to evaluate the implementation of the Conocimiento Project. Program modifications were made during the first year to address the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of the implementation evaluation, EVALCORP completed semi-structured telephone interviews with staff at the two program sites. Additionally, focus groups were conducted over Zoom at each program site with youth participants to gather their feedback regarding the program. The Evaluation Update presents information on the implementation of the program during the first year and includes participant enrollment, demographic information, and several baseline indicators from the intake assessment youth complete when they enroll in the program.



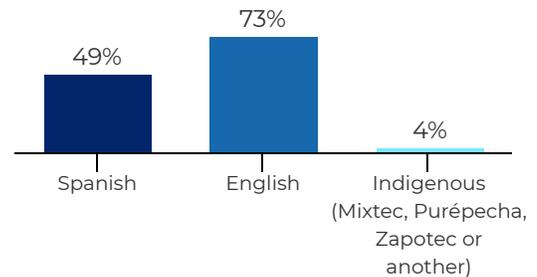
Participants Served

In total, forty-eight youth participated in the Conocimiento Program, across both sites, between January and November 2020. Outlined below is information reflecting the participants.

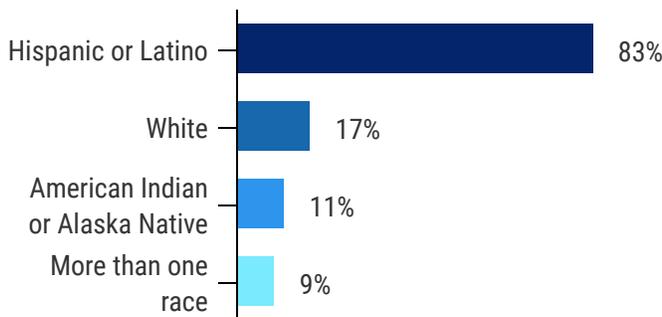
Age (n=46)



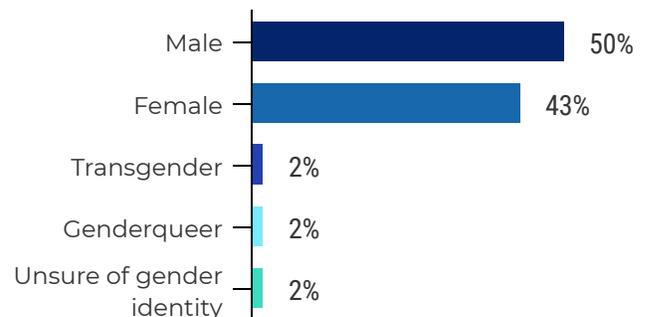
Primary Language (n=45)



Ethnicity of Youth Served (n=46)



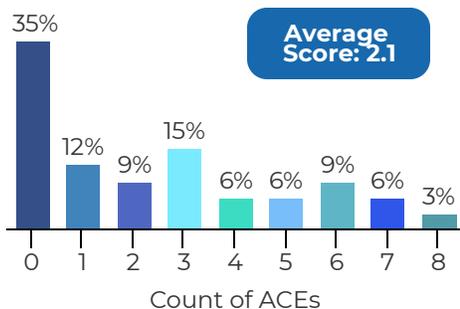
Gender (n=46)



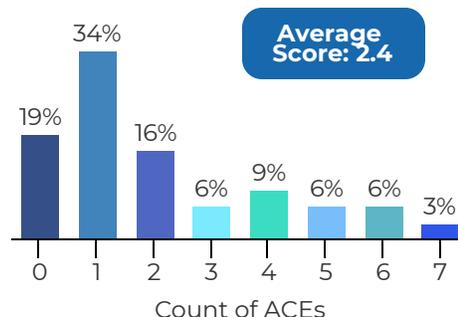
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

As part of the intake assessment, youth are asked about the number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) they have experienced. For this project, a modified ACEs data collection tool was utilized from the Big Brother Big Sisters of Ventura County. This ACEs assessment is comprised of two modules. A score of one or greater in module two indicates that there may be a need for emergency response services. Data presented below is in aggregate form to maintain youth confidentiality.

ACEs Module One*
(n=32)



ACEs Module Two**
(n=34)



65% (n=22)

reported a score of at least 1, indicating there may be a need for emergency responsive services.

* Module one is comprised of ten items, respondents can have a score of zero to ten.

** Module two is comprised of nine items, respondents can have a score of zero to nine.

Summary of Findings: Interviews with Program Staff

Stakeholders were asked to describe the implementation process, successes and challenges, and future recommendations for the Conocimiento Program. The summary of findings from these interviews are separated into sections, pre-COVID and post-COVID to reflect the impacts the global pandemic had on the program.

Pre COVID-19: What Worked Well

Group Meals

Stakeholders reported successes with the implementation of mutual site dinners. With each dinner, program staff saw increased buy-in and participation from both sites. At the first few dinners there was some tension between the two groups but as time went on, staff reported that the tension was decreasing between groups and relationships were building.

“Food is the universal language. No matter how much you hate or like someone, you both can sit down and enjoy the food and enjoy each other’s company to a point. I feel like having those group meals was one of those few times where everyone was very easy going and calm, because they had good food in front of them.”

Youth Leadership Development

Stakeholders at both sites reported successes in recruiting youth to participate in leadership activities. Incentives were offered at one program site to increase recruitment and found this to be very successful. Site staff reported that students enrolled in the leadership group really blossomed in their role. At first, program staff took the lead with planning but as time progressed and youth grew into their leadership position, they really took ownership of the meal planning and identification of wellness topics for the group dinners.

Pre-Planning and Preparing Students for Events

Program staff and leadership found that having an agenda and planned activities for group dinners significantly increased comfort levels amongst program participants. Early on, program staff realized that not all participants had a clear understanding of the purpose of the program and group dinners, leading to decreased participation and increased tensions between groups. To address this, program staff shared detailed information ahead of time with the youth informing them what would be happening at the other site which increased comfort, buy-in from youth, and was helpful to prepare expectations.

Staff Communication

Both sites reported that consistent communication helped keep processes organized for the program. Coordinators would meet before and after the sites had their shared dinners to discuss and coordinate program activities.

Pre COVID-19: Challenges Experienced

Difficulty Engaging Participants

Initially, youth were nervous to speak up and engage in program activities and group dinners. To increase engagement, staff provided introductions to youth to increase comfort and worked to make the space inviting and comfortable for everyone. Staff additionally assisted youth with developing skills such as learning how to introduce themselves in a group setting and lead the youth through ice-breaker activities. Additionally, there were challenges obtaining buy-in from youth that was thought to stem from the historical rivalry and stigma between Santa Paula and Fillmore. Staff initially thought that having the youth participate in the shared dinners would help with the rivalry but noticed that there was a need to overtly discuss topics such as trauma and current and historical gang violence that many of the youth had experienced. To address this, staff developed a plan to address this as a future wellness topic. Due to COVID-19, sites have not yet been able to implement this training with participants.

Age Differences

There is an age difference between the two program sites with one having younger, junior-high aged youth, and the other having more upper-level, high school aged youth. At the program start, it was challenging to mix the groups and initially this caused some tensions between participants. Stakeholders shared that with time and consistent staff engagement they were able to reduce the tension as they continued to meet more frequently.

Interviews with Program Staff (cont.)

COVID-19 Impacts: Looking Ahead

Stakeholders were asked about future planning for the program, what they expected to change, what they would be able to continue doing, and ideas for continuing program activities in the current environment.

Cross-Site Activity Planning

Stakeholders expressed a desire to resume group activities with both program sites in an online format to resume cross-site relationship building. Staff are concerned that if they are unable to bring this component back, they may have to start over to reduce tension between the groups. To address this challenge, stakeholders suggested developing online group activities for both sites to participate in. Meeting on a weekly basis might be too frequent as youth are feeling burnt out from online engagement but program staff are confident that they could identify activities that would be of interest to participants. Suggested virtual activities included:

Virtual movie nights where program participants are provided with popcorn and snacks in advance of the event.

Hosting virtual group dinners where both sites could participate. This could maintain togetherness and facilitate coordination efforts to address town rivalries. At dinners, they could host guest speakers to discuss wellness topics virtually.

Activities

As of this writing, both sites continue to maintain in-person activities for program participants at a limited capacity and in alignment with evolving state safety mandates. Program sites continue their communication to parents regarding the safety measures in place to allow them to feel comfortable with their children returning to the center for programming. Outlined below are activity descriptions for current and planned events.

Staggered Programming: One site is planning to return to in-person activities by breaking up program participants into two mini-teams – Team A and Team B. To participate, individuals must register in advance to join one of the groups with a maximum of 20 teens per group. The site will stagger the time slots for each team with a half-hour in between groups for a cleaning crew to come in to sanitize. This model was adopted to limit disruptions to service and maintain stability for participants.

On-Site Dinners: Program sites are currently doing Friday dinners at a limited capacity, within their individual programs and still are not able to bring the two groups together. Youth leadership is continuing to coordinate the planning for the dinners and are currently learning how to facilitate meetings and write community agreements to make sure everyone is treated equally and has a safe space to be themselves.

Leadership Meetings: Program staff stressed the importance and value in continuing coordination between youth leadership groups. Previously youth leaders would have meetings after group meals and events to discuss what went well, what could have improved, and what they would like to do in the future. They would like to continue this collaboration between groups as it adds value to the program.

Increased Tutoring and Homework Assistance: Program staff noticed early on that many participants struggled with online learning due to a lack of internet access. To address this, one site set up socially distanced pods in pop-up tents to offer homework help and tutoring. They found this to be helpful for the youth and are anticipating an increased need for homework assistance in the future months.

Summary of Findings: Youth Focus Groups

Youth at both sites, Ignite and One Step, participated in separate focus groups over Zoom to share their perspectives and opinions about the project, and share information on what made the program valuable to them. Additionally, youth shared their perspectives on the impacts of COVID-19 on the program and recommendations for moving forward.

Group Dinners: Planning Process – Pre COVID

Participants were asked to share about their planning process for coordinating the group dinners and their experience participating in these events.

Planning Process for Group Dinners: Youth leadership teams from each site would meet in advance of group dinners to plan out the logistics for the event and discuss a variety of items including deciding what to serve and what activities to do. As part of the planning process, youth leaders at both sites would ask each of the students what they would like to have for the group dinner and then review all suggestions at planning meetings to decide what to serve based on the suggestions gathered. This worked well and allowed everyone to participate in the process.

What Participants Liked About the Conocimiento Program

Participants were asked to share what they liked most about the program and what aspects of the program were most meaningful to them.

Group Engagement

- Participants really enjoyed participating in the group dinners and having the opportunity to engage in new activities offered by the program including basketball and dodgeball.
- Many of the youth in the program previously did not have these opportunities available to them and found them very rewarding.

“I liked the socializing before COVID and how everyone got along together, I just like the environment. The way Conocimiento was set up. This organization set up good opportunities to meet new people from out of town. A good experience.”

Increased Support

- Support with homework when needed and program staff helped youth get caught up on school projects if they were behind. Numerous students mentioned seeing their grades increase after receiving help at the program.
- Access to Chromebooks to do schoolwork and online activities, many of the youth do not have access to internet at home and found this very helpful.
- Youth expressed that in general they felt very supported and welcomed at the program.

“The main thing is that we felt very welcome and felt like a family when we were participating. I enjoyed that”

How the Project Helped Participants:

“Before I used to have nothing to do and was lazy in my room, but this got me out to do stuff.”

“For me, I don’t like being home and here I feel more accepted than being at home. Gives me a great time.”

“It’s helped me get through a lot. It’s like another home and the fact that they included Santa Paula was cool.”

“I like getting out of my house and it created more opportunities in a lot of ways for different people. Helps me with getting things out of my mind and it is enjoyable.”

“I had bad grades last year and then came here and they would ask me if I had homework and I got my grades up.”

“I came to Ignite right when it opened, I did not know anyone when I moved here. I got to build friendships and meet even more people and even felt more connected in school.”

“They [staff and program] motivate me to do good in life and not choose the wrong path.”

“They [staff and program] teach you to help on one another and help each other out when someone is in need”

Suggestions for Future Programming

Suggestions From Program Staff

Increased Meetings Between Sites: It was recommended to increase the number of meetings between site staff throughout the year to further increase coordination. Increased meetings are especially important while planning out the shared calendar and events between sites, a clear vision for moving forward, and division of duties.

Early Planning for Summer Event: Recommended to plan the next summer event earlier in the school year to ensure adequate time for planning and coordination between sites. Additionally, it was recommended to have two plans in place for the event – one socially distanced and the other arranged for an in-person event.

Suggestions From Youth

Virtual Group Dinners and/or Activity: Until it is safe to return to in-person programming, youth suggested hosting virtual group events with both program sites to do dinners and activities like charades and other online group games.

Summer Program Events: When it is safe to return to in-person activities, the youth would like to do more summer events like the 'Globe Party' event that was hosted with both sites. The youth really enjoyed the event where they had a dance party with a DJ, glow art painting, henna tattoo artist, and many other activities.