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## **Dealing with Moms and Dads: Family Dilemmas Encountered by Youth Program Leaders**

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## Dealing with Moms and Dads: Family Dilemmas Encountered by Youth Program Leaders

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**Abstract:** The leaders of youth programs encounter a range of challenging situations that involve youth's parents or families. This qualitative study obtained data on the variety and nature of these family-related "dilemmas of practice." Longitudinal interviews with leaders of 10 high quality programs for high-school-aged youth yielded narrative information on a sample of 32 family dilemmas that they had encountered. Grounded theory analysis identified four categories of family dilemmas: 1) problems at home that become a concern to the leader, 2) parents' expectations are incongruent with program norms or functioning, 3) parents do not support youth's participation in the program or an aspect of the program, and 4) communicating with parents on sensitive matters. Each of these categories of dilemmas entailed distinct considerations and underlying issues that effective leaders need to be able to understand.

### Introduction

Parents of young people in youth development programs are generally supportive of their children's participation. They endorse the developmental goals of the program; often play a role in encouraging their child to join (Furstenberg, et al., 1999; Hutchinson, Baldwin, & Caldwell, 2003; Jarrett, 1995); and provide support for the program to the child at home (Kang, Raffaelli, & Tran, 2012). Nonetheless there are occasions when program leaders may encounter tensions, challenging issues, or dilemmas in the program that relate to youth's families. These can include parents' intrusiveness in program activities (Smoll, & Cumming, 2006), family issues that compromise a youth's participation (Larson, & Walker, 2010), and other types of situations. It is important that program leaders understand and develop skills for dealing with the range of family dilemmas that can arise.

Walker and Walker (2012) have advocated discussion and analysis of "practitioner dilemmas" as a vital component to the training of youth professionals. A dilemma is a decision-making

situation that has no clear cut response and requires practitioners to contemplate complex or competing issues (Banks, 2010; Larson, & Walker, 2010). Dilemmas related to youth's families can be particularly difficult because leaders often have little direct contact with them. What happens at home is often opaque and beyond one's control. Yet parents and other family members exert considerable influence on youth that affects youth's program participation or can be a concern because of its effect on a youth's well-being.

The data for this examination of family dilemmas come from a longitudinal study of 10 programs that serve ethnically diverse high-school-aged youth. Our first aim is to describe the variety of family dilemmas encountered by the leaders of these programs, including the considerations they entailed. Across fields of practice, identifying the variety of problems that practitioners are called upon to address is vital to the development of the field (Ericsson, 2006). Our second aim is analysis and interpretation of the underlying issues at stake in the different types of dilemmas. Interpretative thinking –monitoring events, assessing situations, and predicting the course of unfolding events– is a critical element of youth practitioners' work (Larson, Walker, Rusk, & Diaz, submitted). This study is a response to a call for "use inspired" research, aimed at contributing findings, frameworks, and training materials that are helpful to youth practitioners' daily work of supporting youth development (Tseng, 2012).

## Literature Review

### Dilemmas and the Considerations They Entail

Expertise in *any* field of practice entails being able to evaluate and respond to the array of challenging decision-making situations that arise (Ericsson, et al., 2006; Simon, 1996). These situations are often complex, multi-layered and dynamic. Case studies are often employed as a valuable means for both understanding and teaching practitioners about these dilemma situations (Harrington, 1995; Levin, 1994).

Preliminary research indicates that the dilemma situations encountered by youth program leaders can be quite complex. They often entail multiple considerations – multiple issues that a program leader must take into account in appraising and responding to it. These can include developmental, pragmatic, professional, and ethical considerations (Banks, 2010; Larson, & Walker, 2010). In some cases these different considerations can be in tension with each other. An important finding is that program leaders identified as "experts" by their supervisors have been found to identify significantly more considerations (and more *diverse* consideration) than novice program leaders and their responses are more likely to address more of these considerations (Walker, & Larson, 2012). This finding suggests that research identifying patterns in dilemmas can contribute to the field and to practitioner training.

The dilemmas encountered by youth program leaders are wide ranging. Larson and Walker (2010) obtained a database of 250 dilemma situations encountered by frontline program leaders and categorized the considerations they entailed into five broad psycho-social ecological domains (and sub domains within each). The five included running activities, cultivating and enforcing norms and rules, youth's personalities and relationships with each other, relationships among program staff, and the interface between the program and external worlds (Larson, & Walker, 2010). The final domain of dilemmas (interface with external worlds) included a subset that involved youth's families.

## Family Dilemmas

Family dilemmas are important. Parents influence a youth's initial decision to join a program and can influence their decision to quit; parents may also set rules or place demands on youth and the nature of their participation (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, & Stone, 2005; Fletcher, Elder, & Mekos, 2000; Perkins, Borden, Villarruel, Carlton-Hug, Stone, & Keith, 2007). Parents are also important because, when they favor youth's participation, they often provide valuable support that enhances youth's engagement and learning, including encouragement, transportation, and reinforcement of learning (Kang, et al., 2012). Thus leaders need to be judicious in how they respond to situations involving youth's families.

There are many reasons family dilemmas could arise for leaders of programs for adolescents. In some cases parents' values diverge from those of the program, a situation that may be more common among immigrant families (Larson, Pearce, Sullivan, & Dawes, 2007). Another type of dilemma situation, reported in the literature on youth sports, is when parents are overinvolved in ways that can interfere with youth's experiences (Côté, & Hay, 2002; Hutchinson, et al., 2003).

Further, an adolescent's experience *within* his/her family may also impact a youth's experience in a program and become a concern to program leaders. The nature and quality of a youth's relationships with parents can influence an adolescent's self-esteem, socio-emotional adjustment, and their process of ethnic identity formation (Hale, Valk, Engels, & Meeus, 2005; Smetana, et al., 2006; Umaña-Taylor, Bhanot, & Shin, 2006). These may in turn become an issue within the program.

Despite the many potential tension points between program and home, we are aware of no research that focuses on family dilemmas in youth programs (except in sports; Wiersma, & Fifer, 2008). Research on K-12 teachers has identified important family dilemma situations related to communication, parental involvement, professionalism, culture, and family poverty (Crozier, 1999; Suarez-Orozco, & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman-Nelson, 2005). It is important for youth professionals to become aware of how these or other considerations are manifest in youth programs.

## The Current Study

The goal of this study was to systematically explore the family dilemmas leaders encounter. The analyses addressed two aims.

- The first was descriptive: to identify the types of family dilemmas encountered by program leaders and the considerations associated with each.
- The second was interpretive: to examine the underlying pragmatic and theoretical challenges that leaders faced within these dilemmas. What are the underlying issues at stake in the different types of family dilemmas?

This investigation focused on leaders of high quality programs serving adolescents. We employed the data set used by Larson and Walker (2010), which provided a rich source of untapped data on family dilemmas. As noted above, expert program leaders have been found to identify more considerations in dilemmas situation. We felt that use of data from high quality programs would allow us to benefit from effective leaders' deeper, more nuanced appraisal of the family situations they encountered. Grounded theory and related qualitative research methods were employed for this study because they are better suited to understanding the complexity of practice in context.

## Methods

### Sample

The data came from the principal program leaders at 10 high quality programs serving urban and rural youth. The programs included those with a focus on arts, technology, leadership, and service. They varied in size from 10 to 110 youth members (ages ranged from 13-21). Youth in the programs were White, African American, and Latino. The programs were identified as “high quality” based on the opinions of youth development experts in the community, researchers’ meetings with staff, and observations of the programs (following steps used by McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). The original research included 12 programs (Larson, & Walker, 2010), but we have included only the 10 in which leaders reported at least one family dilemma.

The current study included all primary program adult leaders ( $n=14$ ) from the 10 programs. Programs had one to two primary adult leaders. Table 1 provides information on the primary adult leaders. All primary adult leaders were paid professional staff and had been working at their programs for at least two years. The majority of adult leaders were between the ages of 25-35. They were primarily European and African American.

**Table 1**  
Primary Adult Leaders in Sample

Name of Program	N of Dilemmas	N of Interviews	Position of Primary Adult Leaders	Primary Adult Leader Information (Age, Ethnicity, Years in position, Degree)
Clarkston FFA	1	15	FFA Adviser FFA Adviser	30-35, European American, 9 yrs, BA-Education 30-35, European American, 9 yrs, BA-Education
Art First	1	8	Manager of College and Career Program	25-30, European American, 2 yrs, MA-Social Work
Youth Action	7	10	Lead Organizer	25-30, Arab American, 8 yrs, MA-Teaching
Westville H.S. Thespians	7	17	Theater Director Producer	40-45, European American, 9 yrs, BA-Music Ed 50-55, European American, 30 yrs, BA-Speech Communication & English Education; MA-Theater History
Faith in Motion	1	6	Youth Adult Leader	40-45, African American, 2 yrs, BA-Criminal Justice
Media Masters	2	10	Media Instructor Media Instructor	25-30, East Indian, 4 yrs, BA-Art & Technology 25-30, European American, 2 yrs, BA-Unknown
The Studio	4	15	Program Coordinator Employment Specialist	25-30, African American, 3 yrs, Recording Studio School 30-35, African American, 4 yrs, MA-Human Resources
Harambee	1	11	Program Director	25-30, European American, 5 yrs, MA-Social Work
El Concilio	2	8	Outreach & Activities Director	30-35, Puerto Rican, 3 yrs, BA-Unknown
SisterHood	2	14	Program Coordinator Program Coordinator	25-30, European American, 3 yrs, BA-Women’s Studies 20-25, African American, 3 yrs, Education Unknown

## **Procedures**

The program leaders were interviewed at 4-8 points in time over a natural period of program participation, ranging from 2-9 months. In total 114 interviews were conducted with the program leaders in the sample. The leader data were enhanced by program documents, interviews with youth (8-13 youth per program were interviewed following the same interview schedule), and participant observations. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## **Interview Protocol**

Nearly all of the dilemma situations used in the analysis were identified from the leader interviews. Interview protocols included open-ended questions about dilemmas they faced, how they decided to handle such dilemmas and how they felt about their decisions. Additional information about these situations was sometimes obtained from the youth interviews, when a youth was describing his or her ongoing experiences in the program. Most of the data obtained described the nature of the dilemma situations, with less on how leaders responded.

## **Family Dilemma Data Set**

The operational definition used to identify dilemma situations was the following: "Challenges, dilemmas, situations and incidents that the adult leaders faced...any situation that requires deliberation by adult leaders, or where different adult leaders might have responded in different ways. Some may involve long term struggles; others brief situations" (Larson, & Walker, 2010). The majority of family dilemma situations we identified were part of a previously constructed data set of dilemmas identified by Larson and Walker (2010). We identified six additional situations from reviewing transcripts of interviews with adult leaders. In total 32 family dilemmas were identified. Each dilemma situation was expanded by a methodical search of all interviews with leaders and youth for each and every reference to the dilemma situation.

The data was organized in a database with a separate digital file for each dilemma situation. These contained verbatim quotes about the situation, as well as family characteristics (such as ethnicity) of youth involved in that situation, and any notes from relevant program documents. As analysis proceeded a summary was written of each dilemma, and information on coding categorization and the identification of considerations was added.

## **Data Analysis**

The goal of the data analysis was to identify the types of dilemmas adult leaders described and how adult leaders understood the family dilemmas that arose. Based on techniques in grounded theory analysis, the first author engaged in a reciprocal process with the raw data, searched for patterns, and then speculated about what the big ideas were. Throughout the iterative data analysis process, the second author who was thoroughly familiar with the data set and has used grounded theory methods provided feedback that helped refine, specify, and find patterns in categories. This process enabled us to move from a data realm into a conceptual realm and, finally, into a theoretical realm (Glaser, & Strauss, 1967). The data analysis involved three stages that progressed from description to analysis and interpretation.

***Stage one: constructing categories.*** The goal of the first stage of analysis was to identify common categories of family dilemmas. Comparative analysis was utilized (Hood, 2007). We iteratively compared dilemma situations to one another to look for characteristics of dilemmas that were similar. At each iteration, written description of each emerging category was revised to reflect similarities and differences between dilemma situations.

Four categories emerged that involved different types of dilemmas with parents or guardians (N=28). We decided to exclude four dilemma situations from further analysis (3 involving siblings and 1 involving a youth's own child) because there were too few to allow meaningful analysis. In addition, two dilemma situations that were classified into more than one category, were assigned to a primary category for the subsequent analysis. Table 2 provides brief descriptions of all situations within each of the four categories. All names of program leaders, youth, and the programs are pseudonyms.

**Table 2**  
Dilemma Situations within Each Category

<b>Dilemma Category</b>	<b>Dilemma Situation</b>
1) Problems at Home that Become a Concern to the Adult Leader	1) Luis is kicked out of house: youth complain he's spending lots of time at program (The Studio) 2) A girl has issues at home that disrupt her work at the program (Westville H.S. Thespians) 3) Rafael asks the adult leader for advice about a conflict with his parents (Media Masters) 4) Darryl has problems at home because his parents separated (The Studio) 5) A youth confides in adult leader that she might be pregnant and cannot tell mother (SisterHood) 6) A youth with special needs has a difficult home life including her mother being blind and living in a shanty (Clarkston FFA) 7) A youth may not be able to go to an important program event because her mother is upset about babysitting her daughter's child all day (Youth Action) 8) A boy has family problems that prevented him from completing required tech hours (Westville H.S. Thespians)
2) Parents' Expectations are Incongruent with Program Norms or Functioning	1) Different parents want special privileges or treatment because they think their child is the best (Westville H.S. Thespians) 2) Mother is concerned when Mike is considering removing her daughter out of the program (Harambee) 3) One youth's family uses her fundraising money for the program to pay bills; other youth complain (SisterHood) 4) Parents protest that children are asked to come to practice when they're not needed (Westville H.S. Thespians) 5) Premadonna's mother questions why her daughter did not get a bigger role in the play (Westville H.S. Thespians)
3) Parents do not Support Youth's Participation in the Program or an Aspect of the Program	1) Elena's mother forbids her child from participating in the program after making a scene at the program because she saw her daughter with her boyfriend (Youth Action) 2) Parents don't understand the value of the program (Media Masters) 3) Parents are against the program because they do not want their daughters hanging out with boys (Youth Action) 4) Parents feel that the program is a waste of time (Youth Action) 5) Conservative parents take their child out of the program because they think it will have a negative influence on their child (El Concillo) 6) Parents won't let youth go on a trip to Venezuela with the program (Youth Action) 7) Parents are concerned about their children going to the program because the program is in a neighborhood with gangs (Youth Action) 8) Mother of a young lady's baby's father oppose a youth's participation because she thinks the youth should be at home with the baby or working at a job (El Concillo) 9) Parents are uncomfortable with their children's involvement in protest activities that are carried out by program members (Youth Action)

	10) Some parents don't understand or support the program; leader does not know all the reasons but believes parents feel it is another thing pulling youth away from their schoolwork (Youth Action)
<b>Dilemma Category</b>	<b>Dilemma Situation</b>
4) Communicat- ing with parents on sensitive matters	1) Robert's mother needs to know that her son's GPA falls below the required minimum to continue participating (Westville H.S. Thespians) 2) Parents need to be informed about an upcoming protest the program is conducting (Youth Action) 3) Rebecca must call David's mother to explain that the special needs youth cannot be in the program because of ability (Art First) 4) Leader has information she could share with a parent who is also a friend about her daughter dating a boy with a bad reputation (Westville H.S. Thespians) 5) A mother informs the leader that youth are dating within the group which is against the program's policy (Faith in Motion)

**Stage two: identifying considerations.** The goal of the second stage of analysis was to identify the types of considerations that program leaders mentioned in each dilemma category. We conceptualized considerations as the central issues that a program leader was concerned about in the situation. To identify the most frequent considerations within each of the four categories, we first identified and wrote down the specific considerations in each situation as identified by the leaders. These were entered into a matrix listing all the situations within each dilemma category (Miles, & Huberman, 1994). We then conducted comparative analysis to identify considerations that recurred within the category.

**Stage three: interpretation of challenges.** The goal of the third stage was to use interpretive "theoretical analysis" (Strauss, & Corbin, 1998) to identify a central theme – or challenge – that characterized the underlying dilemma in each category. Analyses examined the fundamental issues or tension that leaders faced in relationship to the adolescent and/or the parents. Extant literature was drawn upon to help conceptualize these central challenges.

## Findings

This section discusses each of the four dilemma categories that were identified from the grounded theory analysis. For each category, we first describe the characteristics of dilemma situations in that category. We then provide an example that illustrates these dimensions in more depth. Then we describe the main considerations within each category, followed by our interpretation of the central underlying challenge.

### **Dilemma Category One: Problems at Home that Become a Concern to the Program Leader**

The first dilemma category entails occasions when adult leaders learned about a youth with family problems. Upon learning of the situation, the adult leader became concerned about how these problems between the adolescent and his/her parents impacted the youth's well-being. In some situations, adult leaders learned of family problems when a youth asked for help or complained. In other situations, adult leaders suspected a youth had family problems because of the youth's demeanor. For example, Ann (the director at Westville H.S. Thespians) suspected that a girl who was distracted at rehearsals was having problems at home.

The dilemmas in this category involved varying types of family problems. Some appeared to be ordinary adolescent-parent conflicts such as when a boy at Media Masters asked the instructor for

advice about a conflict with his parents over playing video games at home. Other problems were more serious such as when a girl consulted Linda, program coordinator at SisterHood, because she was too scared to tell her conservative mother about the possibility that she was pregnant. Family stressors, such as poverty and divorce, were factors in some situations.

**Case example.** Neisha, an adult leader at The Studio, faced a dilemma when Luis, a 21 year old youth of Puerto Rican and Jamaican descent, told her about his problems at home. Luis, who previously had a strong relationship with his mother, could no longer live at home because his mother's new, live-in significant other was hostile to him. As a result, Luis had no home, no job, and no money. He felt betrayed by his mother, who had been one of the main people he trusted. Luis described the situation that he experienced:

I went through my little depression stage. I stopped doing music for a little bit, I was just like "Man, I don't know what to do." I still came to the studio and I still recorded. But like doing my own projects it was like I just stopped. I just didn't feel like doing it. I was looking for friends, but then all the sudden friends weren't around no more, so it was like The Studio was the only place for me, you know and I was always here.

Facing this situation, Luis confided in the The Studio leaders about it: "I was always talking to Neisha. They knew my mom had kicked me out and I had nowhere to stay, I was movin' from house to house you know, just real crazy, just real hectic for me at that time."

Neisha was concerned about Luis and his family problems. Luis appeared to be depressed. She thought Luis might need medical attention because he was very emotional, and she was aware that his mother took medication for mental illness. Neisha was also concerned with Luis' lack of motivation in program activities, which she believed was related to issues at home. She explained, "I think that's really like been one of my biggest challenges; working with him and seeing how he wants to do so much, but there's something going on that won't allow him to trust himself." Neisha not only faced a dilemma with Luis individually, she also had other youth complain that Luis was allowed to spend more time at the program than they were. Neisha said they saw this as being unfair.

**Considerations.** Program leaders identified three frequent considerations in this category. The first involved the youth's material and instrumental needs. Luis said he told Neisha: "Man, I haven't eaten in 3 days, Neisha, I don't got no money." He said he was surprised when she addressed that need so quickly by immediately giving him petty cash. In a similar dilemma situation, Tanya, the other leader at The Studio, explained why she focused so much energy on helping Darryl, an 18 year old African American, who lacked self-direction. She explained that Darryl's parents had been separated, there was "not enough money at home, and there's still different family issues."

The second consideration regarded youth's behavior and emotional states or needs. Gary from Media Masters described the emotional state of Rafael, an 18 year old Mexican American, as being "just frustrated" due to an argument with his parents. Ann, at Westville H.S. Thespians, speculated about one girl's reticence to follow the stage directions which called for her to fall and be caught by other cast members:

There has got to be a reason...could it be something like she is scared of heights? Could it be something like - or let's go deeper. So you are constantly having to listen to what she is not saying as well as what she is saying, and it was some serious issues at home.

Similarly, Neisha speculated about how the problems that Luis had at home might be influencing his behavior and emotional state. She stated,

There's a disconnect somewhere...I don't know if it's his mother, his friends or somewhere, it's somebody or maybe it's just something inside of him that kinda makes him feel like he can't do it, or he's not good enough to do certain things.

At times this consideration required detective work-- program leaders made educated guesses about the cause of a youth's behavior, emotional state or needs. They evaluated differences in a youth's behavior or tried to remember past family problems that may have resurfaced. Then they sought to confirm their speculations by talking with the youth.

Third, program leaders considered possible roles they could or should play. Some were also articulate about roles that they should not play. During the interviews they said it was important that they not give up on youth with problems and that they make sure they listen. Yet they were aware that they did not have the training or mandate to be a therapist. Neisha struggled with the possible roles she should play and what role would be most beneficial to Luis: "I think the more that I help him he becomes kinda dependent on me doing things for him and I don't want him to depend on me." Linda from SisterHood described struggling when a young woman confided in her that she might be pregnant yet could not confide in her conservative mother.

**Central challenge for dilemmas entailing family problems.** An underlying challenge we identified for this category was leaders' recognition that the family system and its effects on youth were two things that they could not control. Leaders could see the impact of the family on youth's demeanor, behavior, and self-esteem in the program. And family issues caused youth to reach out to leaders. However, leaders could rarely respond directly to the root of the problem because it was outside of their control. For example, although Neisha considered the impact being kicked out had on Luis, she did not consider trying to persuade his mother to let him stay in the household, because the role of family counselor was outside of her control and her professional mandate.

For the most part, then, this challenge required adult leaders to play an indirect role. They often responded by making a conscientious effort to cultivate a supportive relationship with the youth. Some research suggests that youth's relationships with program leaders can contribute to a youth's well-being and can be particularly beneficial for youth who have negative relationships with their parents (Rhodes, 2004; Mahoney, et al., 2002). Leaders checked in with youth, listened, comforted them, and provided advice and other assistance. They were strategic and resourceful and did what they could within the limits of their powers as a program leader.

### **Dilemma Category Two: Parents' Expectations are Incongruent with Program Norms or Functioning**

The second dilemma category involved situations when parents' expectations were at odds with program norms, rules, or ways of doing things. Programs and program leaders had expectations regarding the youth's behavior, attendance, and codes for interacting with each other. A dilemma would emerge, however, when adult leaders faced parents who wanted something that did not fit with these program norms. The majority of these dilemmas (3 out of 5) were from Westville H.S. Thespians, a program that had many participants (110) and many rules and norms to manage how they functioned.

**Case example.** The adult leaders at Westville H.S. Thespians faced demands from parents that were incongruent with the expectations they had set in place to produce a successful play. Because they had encountered these demands before, they held a meeting with youth and parents to discuss the obligations youth were required to meet before each production; gave them a contract that youth and parents had to sign; and distributed detailed monthly schedules with time expectations.

As rehearsals progressed, however, some parents questioned the adult leaders about the scheduling of the practices, the time commitment of participating, and the time it took away from academics. For example, Ann received notes from parents such as, "Why is my child having to be there? My child has to study." During the ACT exam time parents complained that youth needed to go to bed early the night before, not rehearse for a play. Ann stated: "I always will have a few disgruntled parents, it's always been that way, it probably always will be that way." Nonetheless, these demands (and complaints from parents about the roles their children received) were aggravating.

**Considerations.** Two frequent considerations were identified within this set of dilemma situations. First, leaders considered how parents perceived or might perceive the situation. For example, Mike at Harambee considered the mother's point of view when she angrily confronted him about how he should not dismiss her daughter from the program. He viewed the parent's combative reaction as understandable because of parents' experiences in dealing with the school system:

A school that doesn't treat parents well and a school where, often times, parents feel the only recourse they have is to get loud and make some demands....all of [these] things are in play when something like this happens.

Liz, another adult leader at Westville H.S. Thespians, described making an effort to be very tactful in a conversation with one mother who complained about her daughter not getting bigger roles because she recognized that the mother thought her daughter was extremely talented.

In addition, leaders considered how fulfilling the expectations of parents could impact the program. Ann had parents who questioned why some youth were required to come to attend practice when they were not rehearsing. But she felt letting them come and go would make rehearsals a nightmare for her. She did not want to have to call every student and tell them "You need to be here at this time, exactly at this time," [because] that's all I would get done, so I have to have a general call, if you're in scene one, if you're in scene two, you know, you need to be here." Although Mike, at Harambee, was sensitive to the mother's anger, her daughter had been continually violating program rules and disrupting the work of other youth, despite his numerous warning to her. So Mike stood by his decision and carefully explained the situation to the mother, and she understood.

**Central challenge for dilemma involving parents' expectations.** For this category of dilemmas, our analysis suggested that a central challenge was determining an appropriate accommodation between the interests of parents and the interests of the program. On the one hand, leaders were attentive to parents' point of view. This was evident when Mike recognized that navigating the school system may shape how parents view Harambee. On the other hand, it was important for leaders to be vigilant about the interests of the program. Conceding to parental demands that are incongruent with program norms could negatively impact the program's functioning. As Walker and Larson (2012) found with other types of dilemmas, practitioner

expertise in these situations required leaders to balance or reconcile competing demands-- in this case the interests of the parents and the program.

### **Dilemma Category Three: Parents do not Support Youth's Participation in the Program or an Aspect of the Program**

The third category involved parents who opposed or did not fully support youth's participation in the program. Whereas parents in Category Two wanted the adult leader to make changes to the program to accommodate their child, parents in Category Three had reservations about their child being in the program. Parents either did not support participation by describing what they did not like about the program or opposed participation by trying to forbid their child from participating in the program altogether. At times adult leaders described dilemmas involving specific parents such as when Pablo at El Concilio described parents who looked through the program window and told him the program was too much fun and not a good place for youth. Other adult leaders described parental opposition in more general terms such as Janna at Media Masters who stated that "a lot of parents...don't understand the value of the program."

Analysis of youth interviews suggested that parents who had reservations about the program often had values that diverged from the program's mission or thought youth's priorities should be elsewhere. In particular, youth interviews suggested that immigrant parents were often not familiar with the concept of a youth program, wanted daughters at home for safety or childcare, or opposed youth getting into a career in the arts. Some parents opposed participation but never directly communicated this to adult leaders. Jason, the Lead Organizer at Youth Action, described the downside of not being directly informed of parental opposition, "I'd rather have the parents who are going to question, because then I know what's up, otherwise I don't know if the parents don't care or do care."

**Case example.** Elena, an 18 year old Mexican American in Youth Action, had a mother who was against her participation in this youth activism program. Elena came from a conservative, Catholic background and her parents were immigrants. She said her mother, "didn't understand what I wanted to do organizing work for and she didn't understand why I had to be at a center like 3 days out of the week or why I had to be with boys all the time." One night Elena's mother saw her at a program fundraising event with her boyfriend and demanded she quit. Elena told her mom she would not quit. Elena explained, "...that's when she ended up kicking me out. And I didn't quit and I'm not at home, so--she's not supportive."

Jason, the adult leader at Youth Action, faced a dilemma when Elena's mother caused a scene and ordered her to quit. He knew about issues Elena had with her mother before, because she had often discussed them with him. However, Jason had never seen Elena this upset before. He was unsure how he should react in the immediate situation and, then, faced a situation in which Elena had been kicked out of her house because of her refusal to quit the program.

**Considerations.** The considerations in Category Three dealt with the reasons the leader knew or suspected parents were opposed to the program. First, in some cases leaders considered cultural values. Rica, an adult staff volunteer at Youth Action, brought up culture when she described how some parents did not want their daughters hanging out with boys:

For the young women, the parents don't want them to come and hang out with young men... I can relate to them because my mother was the same way, and she was very careful about where I was and what I was doing. I'm Latina, so I think that helps.

Jason consulted Rica for her cultural knowledge when considering Elena's situation. Culture was also a factor in an immigrant father's concern that an arts program not become a career interest for his son.

In other cases, leaders considered parents' concerns about their child's safety. Tonya said some parents worried that The Studio was in an area with gang activity. She would explain to parents the precautions the program takes, including having a gang intervention specialist who ensured that gangs respected the area around the program as a safe zone.

Finally, program leaders considered that parents could have other priorities for their children, such as being successful in school, getting a job, or taking care of other family members. For example, in a separate situation Jason from Youth Action considered the importance parents placed on a youth's academics when he stated, "If they're messing up in school and their parents feel like Youth Action is just one other thing that pulls them away from it, then it becomes a tension."

### ***Central challenge for dilemma involving parental opposition.***

An underlying challenge of this category was respecting parental concerns while advocating the value of the program. Leaders sought to understand what parental concerns were, a difficult task given that leaders' knowledge of these concerns was often obtained secondhand, from the youth. At the same time some tried to build trust with the parents; for example, by phoning parents or inviting them to the program. By recognizing and respecting concerns, adult leaders hoped to show parents that the program was a space safe for their child. These leaders felt they could address parental concerns the majority of the time. Tonya said there "was usually always a reason behind it and I would say 9 times out of 10 it was a reason that we could possibly fit." However, youth data suggests that parents did not always change their opinion.

### ***Dilemma Category Four: Communicating With Parents on Sensitive Matters***

The fourth category entailed situations when a leader weighed whether and how to communicate sensitive information to parents about the program or their child. The information ranged from youth's participation in an upcoming protest to which some parents might object (at Youth Action) to conveying information about a child's behavior in the program. Sometimes leaders questioned whether it was their place to share information, such as debating whether certain information betrayed a youth's trust. At times, the idea of sharing information with a parent was nerve-racking because of its delicate nature.

***Case example.*** Rebecca, an adult leader at Art First (an art and career development program), was nervous about calling David's mother. He had been enrolled in a Career Planning course, and his mother assumed that she could sign him up for the Art-at-Work program. However, David had a "severe learning disorder," and the leaders decided the second program was not developmentally appropriate for the young man. Rebecca was aware that David's mother valued the program as a safe space for him and she respected the mother's efforts to address David's needs. Therefore, Rebecca felt she needed to contact his mother directly, but she stated: "THAT's going to be a challenge for me, that phone call."

***Considerations.*** Program leaders reported several considerations in these situations. First, they considered how they thought parents would react to the information communicated. For example, would David's mother express righteous indignation that Rebecca was unwilling to make accommodations for special needs young people?

The youth's well-being was a second frequent consideration in these dilemmas. Rebecca considered whether Art-at-Work would put David "in a position where he would be struggling." Ruth at Westville H.S. Thespians was also considering a girl's well-being when she debated contacting a mother because her daughter, a freshman thespian, was dating a senior:

I heard via the grapevine that this senior intentionally went out with freshmen girls to see what he could get.... And that worried me. ...Should I call, what should I do, and so finally I did call her, and said this may be none of my business, and anytime you want...you just tell me to drop it, I will, but this is my concern.

When deciding what to communicate to parents, a third consideration was leaders' competing obligations. Ruth weighed her obligations to the girl's mother (who was her friend) and to the girl. Does she violate program members' rights if she shares information with their parents behind their backs?

Ann at Westville H.S. Thespians struggled with her obligation as a friend to another parent, when the friend's son Robert's GPA fell below the state-mandated cutoff for students' participation in school extracurricular activities. Ann had to tell her friend that Robert was being cut from the play, but anguished over how to explain it:

That was kind of hard for his parents to understand because they were seeing that drama's what made him want to study, so it's kind of one of those catch 22 situations but at the same time there are rules put by the district also that I need to go by, and that I totally agree with...I'm hoping that it gets cleared up, you know, on a personal level.

***Central challenge for dilemmas involving communicating with parents on sensitive matters.*** An underlying challenge for this category was communicating to parents in discrete ways that were both forthright and respectful to all involved. They felt an obligation to provide accurate information to parents. Yet they also recognized boundaries in what they could or should share, as when Ruth deliberated about the freshman's privacy rights before reporting her liaisons with a senior to her parents. They also recognized the benefits and consequences of sharing it. In many cases this category was about the leader doing what they considered right even when it was difficult or emotionally taxing.

## Conclusions

It is important that practitioners – and the field of youth development as a whole – to understand and become conversant with the range of challenging family situations that can arise in youth practice. This research identified four common categories of dilemmas that involve youth's families. These involved problems youth are facing at home, parents' expectations that diverge from the leaders', absence of parent support for the program, and challenges leaders face in communicating with parents about sensitive issues. This research helps us examine and interpret the types of underlying considerations and challenges they can present to youth practitioners.

Our analysis suggests that many of these considerations stem from differences between the worlds of program and family. Leaders and parents are both concerned with the well-being of the child but may differ in their priorities and the nature of their relationships with youth. Leaders are concerned with fostering a group of youth's participation in the developmental mission of the program, while parents are concerned with their child's personal needs and responsibilities across many domains and within the context of their families' cultural background, values, and beliefs.

Program leaders have a relatively short-term and unencumbered relationship with the adolescent, one that often bridges the roles of friend, teacher and mentor (Walker, 2010). Parents have a historical, lifelong attachment and caretaking relationship with the youth, which gives them greater knowledge of the youth, but can sometimes impede parent-adolescent communication. In some cases families are dealing with poverty, strained relationships, and other family demands, which program leaders cannot control and may not understand. Program leaders face the task of understanding parents' perspectives and the youth's experience as a member of a particular family world.

Reconciling or navigating these divergent worlds can be difficult. In many cases leaders have had little or no prior contact with parents. This can make it hard to communicate with parents or get information about a sensitive family situation. In some cases leaders feel that their obligations to parents compete with their obligations to the youth (i.e. protecting the youth's privacy, supporting his or her autonomy).

Although leaders have constraints on what they can do, they also have certain powers and opportunities. This study did not obtain systematic data on how the leaders responded to the dilemma situations, but many of the leaders' provide accounts of what effective responses look like. In some cases, they used their mentoring relationship with youth to help the youth problem solve, develop strategies for communicating with their parents, and obtain resources (e.g., support services) to deal with their situation. In some cases they were able to communicate directly with parents which generally led to mutual understanding. Experienced leaders had learned strategies for reducing some of parents' concerns before they came up. In most of these cases, leaders' efforts to understand situations from all points of view helped them respond in ways that had favorable outcomes.

### **Future Research**

Future studies can provide practitioners a more comprehensive picture of the types of family dilemmas that arise and how effective practitioners respond to them. An important set of questions is how the nature of dilemmas in a program is shaped by community, family, individual and program characteristics. From an ecological viewpoint, the nature of dilemmas may be expected to reflect larger community dynamics, including those related to inter-group relations (or fissures), poverty, and institutional resources. Individual characteristics of the child, parents, and families may also shape dilemmas that arise. The role of culture, for example, should be explored as both a possible contributor to dilemmas (e.g., some immigrant parents grew up in contexts in which youth program did not exist) or as a source of assets for programs. Another important issue is how the institutional features of the youth organization (e.g., how they define their relationships to youth's parents) may contribute. For example, it would be helpful to compare programs that take an intentional approach to integrating parents with those who do not.

Practitioners can also benefit from studies examining the effectiveness of different leaders' response to similar categories of family dilemmas. By studying the responses of expert (vs. novice) leaders, researchers can bring to light the accumulated practitioner wisdom in the youth development field (Larson, Rickman, Gibbons, & Walker, 2010).

### **Implications for the Field of Youth Development**

It is clear that experienced practitioners like those in our sample have expertise to share. Our preliminary analysis of these dilemmas can provide a stepping stone toward collaborative discussion within the field that leads toward collective articulation of underlying principles and contributions to professional development (Walker, & Walker, 2012). Evidence shows that

professional development is most effective when it occurs in ongoing learning communities (Cuban, 1992), when it is based on an empowerment rather than a transmission model (Heathfield, 2012), and when it is deliberative – when it helps practitioners apply knowledge to the complexities of diverse situations (Walker, & Walker, 2012). Novice – and even experienced – youth practitioners could benefit from opportunities to share, build, brainstorm, and learn from each other about everyday dilemmas of practice, including those involving families.

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