Development, Evaluation, and Dissemination of

ESCAPE

AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY-BASED CURRICULUM FOR ABUSE PREVENTION AND EMPOWERMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Overview

As a result of recent policies and laws emphasizing independence and inclusion, individuals with mental retardation (intellectual disability) are facing an increasing range of opportunities in their lives in the community. All too often, however, these new opportunities have been associated with increased vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Efforts to expand decision-making opportunities for people with mental retardation are often frustrated by the limited ability of these individuals to make effective, self-protective decisions. The present project (a collaboration between the Center for Opportunities and Outcomes for People with Disabilities at Teachers College, Columbia University and AHRC New York City) was designed to address the problem of the heightened vulnerability of women with mental retardation to domestic violence and abuse by known individuals.

This three-year project focused on the development, evaluation and dissemination of a systematic educational curriculum – ESCAPE: An Effective Strategy-Based Curriculum for Abuse Prevention and Empowerment. The purpose of this curriculum was to empower women with mental retardation to become more effective decision-makers so that they can protect themselves against violence and abuse and benefit more fully from increased opportunities for independence and community inclusion. The project’s focus was on situations of violence and abuse in the home and community, particularly those involving individuals who were known to the participants, including partners, family members, friends and acquaintances.

The ESCAPE curriculum consists of 12 curriculum lessons and 6 support group sessions covering three broad units:

- **Unit I – Knowledge of Abuse and Empowerment**
- **Unit II – Decision-Making Strategy Training**
- **Unit III – Women’s Support Groups**

**Evaluation of the ESCAPE Curriculum**

The initial phase of the curriculum evaluation focused on identifying and recruiting project participants from agency sites and on developing, implementing and evaluating Units I and II of the ESCAPE curriculum. Participants completed an extensive pretest battery and were then randomly assigned to receive one of two programs: ESCAPE (the new curriculum-based intervention program developed as part of this project) or the existing AHRC abuse prevention program (an eclectic approach that incorporates the current best practices for addressing domestic violence and abuse prevention issues with adults with mental retardation).

The 18 women who received the ESCAPE curriculum constituted the project’s treatment
group and the 18 women who received the AHRC abuse prevention program constituted the project’s alternative-treatment control group. Because the focus of the project was on prevention, all women who participated in the project (both treatment and control conditions) continued to receive any needed services for the treatment of abuse-related problems. The effects of the treatment and comparison programs were compared in terms of participant performance on a battery of posttest instruments.

The second phase of the project focused on the development, implementation and evaluation of a support group system (Unit III of the curriculum) for the women who had already received Unit I and Unit II of the curriculum as part of the treatment group. These women participated in semi-structured support groups comprised of the same small groups of women who had met together for the Unit I and Unit II activities. These support groups met over six sessions and were co-led by a member of the Teachers College project team and by a social worker from the AHRC staff. A battery of selected post-posttests was utilized to measure treatment effects of these support groups.

The final phase of the project consisted of providing the women in the control group with access to the project interventions. Members of the Teachers College project team trained several AHRC staff members and worked collaboratively with them to implement the ESCAPE curriculum with the control group women. These staff members, who now have the necessary training and experience, will continue to offer the curriculum to new groups of women and to provide ongoing support group experiences to all women who have already received the curriculum. A domestic violence and abuse prevention center is in the initial stages of being established at AHRC as an outgrowth of this collaborative project. The project team is currently seeking opportunities for additional funding to continue the collaborative pursuit of project-related initiatives.

Evaluation Findings

After receiving Unit I (Knowledge of Abuse/Empowerment) and Unit II (Decision Making) of the ESCAPE curriculum, the performance of the women in the treatment group was significantly better than that of the women in the control group on posttest measures of knowledge about different types of abuse (physical, sexual, and verbal), empowerment (feelings of being in control), and effective decision making in situations pertaining to the self (What would you do if this happened to you?). Although significant group differences were not obtained on posttest measures of stress management and decision making with videotaped scenarios, additional analyses are needed to comprehensively assess the impact of the intervention on those measures. In their responses to the Unit II exit-interview question about whether the group activities had helped them, the women in the treatment group clearly attested to the benefits of the curriculum (e.g., We can stand up for ourselves/it helped me with decisions when I have a bad relationship or a good relationship/it helped me a lot to help myself).

After receiving Unit III (Women’s Support Groups) of the ESCAPE curriculum, women in the treatment group continued to perform better than women in the control group on the quantitative measures of knowledge about types of abuse, empowerment, and self
decision making. In addition, qualitative analysis of the support group sessions indicated that the women felt that participation in the curriculum and support group activities was having a variety of positive effects on their lives (e.g., *It has helped me tell (ex-boyfriend) to get away. He was always joking about me and I didn’t like it.*). The women’s comments indicated a general increase in their individual self-efficacy and feelings of being in control of their own lives and being able to prevent abuse.

Overall, the evaluation findings indicated clear positive effects of the *ESCAPE* curriculum. The impact of the curriculum on the participants’ knowledge about abuse, feelings of empowerment, and decision-making skills is a promising indicator that women with mental retardation can be prepared to take control of important aspects of their lives and to effectively prevent and handle situations of abuse.

**Dissemination Activities**

Dissemination was a major focus of the project. Dissemination efforts have targeted local, national, and international audiences including families, professionals, and policy makers. Dissemination activities have included:

- **ESCAPE Curriculum Package.** The project has yielded the *ESCAPE* curriculum, a validated, field-tested abuse prevention curriculum package including an instructor’s manual, a booklet of vignettes and visuals, a booklet of masters of reproducible activity sheets and stickers, and an easel/portfolio to present vignettes and store activity sheets and stickers. A training video, based on the instructor’s manual and ongoing staff training activities at AHRC, is currently under development and will be added to the package to facilitate the wide dissemination of the curriculum.

- **Workshops.** Throughout the course of the project, workshops have been offered to familiarize service providers at the various AHRC facilities with the goals and strategies of the project. Workshops featuring the project intervention were also presented at AHRC Family Day and at a mini-conference of the New York State Association of Day Service Providers, an inter-agency organization for day habilitation programs.

- **Preservice Module.** A module featuring the *ESCAPE* curriculum has been incorporated into the graduate course on the Nature and Needs of People with Mental Retardation (HBSE 4010) taught by Professor Linda Hickson at Teachers College, Columbia University. This course, required for students enrolled in the MA programs in Mental Retardation/Intellectual Disability and Guidance and Habilitation, is also selected as an elective by many students in other Teachers College programs.

- **Internship Opportunities.** Numerous students in the MA and doctoral programs in the education of students with mental retardation/intellectual disability and guidance and habilitation have been actively involved in all aspects of this project as interns, assistants, and research fellows.

- **Conference Presentations.** Throughout the three years of the project, symposia and poster presentations have been presented at the annual conference of the Center for Opportunities and Outcomes for People with Disabilities at Teachers College, Columbia University (2000, 2001, and 2002), at the annual convention of the
American Association on Mental Retardation (2000 and 2002), at a conference sponsored by the President’s Committee on Mental Retardation (2000), and at the conference of the International Association on the Scientific Study of Intellectual Disability (2000).

- **Publications.** Upon completion of this final report, the project team will continue to work collaboratively to prepare manuscripts for submission to peer-reviewed journals, including *Mental Retardation, Disability and Sexuality*, and the *Journal of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy* (invited submission for a special issue of the journal).

- **World Wide Web and Newsletters.** Throughout the three-year project, descriptions and updates have been provided in the newsletters and on the websites of AHRC and the Center for Opportunities and Outcomes for People with Disabilities. Up-to-date information about project outcomes and the availability of the *ESCAPE* curriculum, training workshops, and publications will be maintained on the website of the Center for Opportunities and Outcomes for People with Disabilities at Teachers College, Columbia University (www.tc.columbia.edu/oopd).

**Conclusions**

This three-year effort to develop, evaluate, and disseminate an abuse prevention curriculum for women with mental retardation has accomplished all three of its stated goals.

- An *Effective Strategy-Based Curriculum for Abuse Prevention and Empowerment (ESCAPE)* has been developed and it is now available in a complete, user-friendly package.
- An evaluation study has been completed, yielding clear evidence for the effectiveness of the *ESCAPE* curriculum on several outcome measures.
- A variety of dissemination activities have provided (and will continue to provide) information about the project to local, national, and international audiences.

Our experiences with this three-year project have underscored the need to continue collaborative efforts in this area. Our collaborators at AHRC New York City have expressed considerable enthusiasm about the project, indicating that it addressed a pressing need and that it has yielded an extremely valuable resource for the field. Although the evaluation study has indicated that the curriculum intervention was effective, the members of our collaborative team agree that most of the participating women could benefit further from an extended time period in which to master the content and become proficient at applying it to their own lives. We are committed to continuing our work together to obtain additional funding to continue this line of prevention research through both longitudinal follow-up studies with the participating women and the design and evaluation of effective interventions.