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Boundaries: A Boundary Setting and Social Competence Program for Parents and Youth

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Learning to set age-appropriate boundaries is an integral element of positive youth development. Both parents and youth need guidance in rule-setting and negotiating boundaries. North Dakota State University Extension created Boundaries, a program using parent-youth relationships to teach the importance of setting and following rules or boundaries in various environments. Boundaries was written for 7th- through 12th-grade youth and their parents. This study provides an overview of the program's objectives and curriculum and shares findings from evaluation efforts conducted with over 60 youth and adults during the program's pilot phase. In six pilot sessions, respondents completed single-session retrospective questionnaires and answered open-ended questions, which were analyzed using descriptive statistics, paired t-tests, and thematic review. Adults reported higher satisfaction than youth with program content and instruction. Both youth and adults increased their knowledge of program-specific content related to boundaries and relationships. Open-ended responses offered positive feedback and suggestions for program improvement. Results suggested the program was perceived positively and increased youth and adult knowledge of boundary setting and social competence in family life and other settings. Key recommendations include increased rigorous evaluation to measure program impacts and focus on effective implementation strategies for the program.

Keywords: boundaries, rules, parent-youth relationships, positive youth development, youth protective factors

Introduction

The future of any society rests upon the strength of its youth, who represent the next generation, and the development of their capacities and potential (Levine, 2007). Thus, the task of raising the next generation occupies adults and requires them to consider how to help youth acquire the knowledge, skills, and experiences that will promote their growth and success (Dymnicki et al., 2016; Villar, 2012).

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The family setting has been recognized as a context of particular importance in efforts to raise youth and equip them with needed skills and experiences (Guerra et al., 2011). In addition, families are supported by youth-serving institutions such as 4-H, whose vision is “A world in which youth and adults learn, grow, and work together as catalysts for positive change” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, & 4-H National Headquarters, 2017, p. 2). Well-designed youth and family education programs aid in the process of developing relationships and building life skills that are critical to the future well-being and success of both youth and families (Duncan & Goddard, 2017; Hage & Romano, 2013). Among important life skills, social competence in relationships for both youth and adults is vital for healthy living and personal well-being (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). Additionally, understanding and negotiating boundaries, whether following rules within the home or being a good citizen and following traffic laws, involves helpful life skills such as decision making and responsibility (Ebersole & Hernandez, 2016; Hart, 2016). Development of these life skills can be facilitated and enhanced through the involvement of youth and adults in educational programming. An example of such programming that targets parents (or other adults) and youth to develop social competence and boundary awareness and negotiation is *Boundaries*.

The idea for *Boundaries* originated with the Beulah, North Dakota Ministerial Association. The Association recognized a need in the community to offer programming for parents and youth related to rule-setting and negotiating boundaries. When the Association’s members realized a program such as this did not exist, a committee formed to begin working alongside North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension specialists to develop a program to meet this identified need for youth and families in the community.

Boundaries, available both through NDSU Extension and the [Extension Foundation](#) (2021) online course catalog, provides guidance not only for parents in setting and enforcing appropriate rules or boundaries for youth, but the program also teaches youth to set their own boundaries, make good decisions, and develop social skills in managing boundaries. *Boundaries* was written for 7th- through 12th-grade youth and their parents. Due to the growing interest in *Boundaries* and the need for the same type of curriculum for a younger audience, *Boundaries* was adapted for youth in 3rd through 6th grades and their parents. This new version, *Boundaries Jr.*, teaches the same concepts, but the activities, examples, and terminology are tailored to a younger audience.

This article offers an overview of the program’s theoretical background and objectives, a detailed description of the curriculum and its elements, initial findings from the pilot testing phase, and guidelines related to implementation and application. Program evaluation practice suggests that there is substantial value in conducting a pilot phase investigation of a program’s intermediate effects to further refine the program and assess its impact potential (Perales, 2010). The purpose of this study was to evaluate initial outcomes associated with the pilot implementation of an

innovative youth and family education program, *Boundaries*, that teaches boundary setting and social competence and to assess implications for further program development.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Youth in modern society face a variety of unhealthy influences that concern parents, ranging from depression or delinquency to substance abuse issues. The risk and protective factors framework suggests there are common risk and protective factors for different concerns, that they apply similarly among different groups of youth, and that protective factors can offset the effects of risk factors and foster resilience (Lerner et al., 2013). Positive youth development approaches emphasize helping youth develop protective factors, or assets, that allow them to thrive and contribute to their communities (Geldhof et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2007). Similarly, prevention science mitigates risk and enhances protective elements in the lives of children, youth, and families (Sanders et al., 2015). Specifically, such approaches build resilience and “concentrate on positive aspects of functioning and on protective factors and aspects of resilience that reduce risk and enhance positive outcomes for young people” (Development Services Group, 2013, p. 2).

Building on this approach, NDSU Extension developed a new program to build youth resilience using the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF) Protective Factors Framework as the theoretical basis and guide for the effort. The ACYF Protective Factors Framework focuses on ten evidence-based factors across three dynamic, multi-level domains: individual, relational, and societal or community (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). The ACYF Framework includes the following ten protective factors as they fit into one of the three multi-level domains: (a) individual – self-regulation; relational skills; problem-solving skills; involvement in positive activities; (b) relational – parenting competencies; positive peers; caring adults; and (c) societal or community – positive community involvement; positive school environment; economic opportunities (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). Norman and Jordan (2018) indicated that positive youth development programs seek to “identify the skills within the five targeted competency areas that are appropriate to the age of the youth in the program and offer experiences to teach these skills,” which in turn help youth in “developing skills that are healthy and productive for both youth and their communities” (para. 1). The five targeted competency areas include: (a) knowledge, (b) reasoning and creativity, (c) personal/social, (d) vocational/citizenship, and (e) health/physical. Specifically, these five competency areas are all subsumed to fit within the four-category structure of the 4-H Pledge, outlined next in the description of the 4-H Targeting Life Skills Model (Norman & Jordan, 2018).

The protective factors in the ACYF Framework used in developing this new NDSU Extension program overlap well with the four skill competency areas outlined in the 4-H Targeting Life Skills Model: (a) Head – knowledge competencies; reasoning and creativity competencies

(thinking and managing); (b) Heart – personal/social competencies (relating and caring); (c) Hands – vocational/citizenship competencies (giving and working); and (d) Health – health/physical competencies (living and being) (Hendricks, 1998; Norman & Jordan, 2018). Both the ACYF Framework and the 4-H Targeting Life Skills Model served as the foundation for developing this new program, which targets the development of essential life skills and builds resiliency in youth. Furthermore, we strategically selected a key developmental issue, boundary setting and negotiation, which emerges across a variety of contexts such as work, school, home, media, etc. to create a program applicable to both youth and their parents (Ebersole & Hernandez, 2016; Hart, 2016).

An integral part of parenting and raising competent youth is balancing parental demandingness for boundaries compliance with parental responsiveness to child needs or concerns. In other words, parents must set reasonable limits while showing love and affection for their children (Baumrind, 2013). Research on parenting styles suggests that in authoritative or balanced families, parents set guidelines for their children's behavior and uphold certain standards, but the rules are flexible and open for discussion. Even though authoritative parents may have the final say regarding their children's behavior, the decision typically comes only after asking the children for their suggestions and carefully considering them before making a final decision (Bornstein & Bornstein, 2014; Steinberg, 2019). These parents explain the rules, or boundaries, to their children and try to create partnerships, which in turn help the children develop the skills they need to set their own boundaries and make good decisions on their own (Lerner, 2007; Walsh, 2007). Additionally, caring adults assist youth as they learn to implement and manage boundaries in their peer relationships, work or school settings, and behavioral choices (Hart, 2016). This give-and-take process is well suited for the healthy development of emotional autonomy in children (Steinberg, 2019) and the promotion of positive youth development (Geldhof et al., 2013).

Because learning to set age-appropriate boundaries is an integral element of positive youth development, both parents and youth alike need guidance in rule-setting and the processes of boundary negotiation (Walsh, 2007). Both of these topics fit well within the larger context of positive youth development and healthy parent-child relationships. Shaw (2014) noted,

Parenting programs that address specific types of child behavior (e.g., developmental disabilities, child conduct problems) or target specific developmental transitions ... seem to be more successful than those that treat a wide range of problem behaviors or a wide age range of young children. (para. 5)

Additionally, “successful programs have developed ways to maximize parents’ investment by emphasizing the importance of young children’s development and linking it to parenting skills and parents making healthful decisions about their own well-being” (Shaw, 2014, para. 8).

Even though parental involvement is considered to be a key component in making Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug (ATOD) prevention programs successful for youth in middle and high school, a review of a nationally representative sample of such programs found this component to be included the least (Kumar et al., 2013). To bridge this gap, NDSU Extension agents and specialists created a program called *Boundaries*, targeting rule-setting and boundary negotiation with youth while combining parental involvement and supportive parent-child relationships.

Boundaries utilizes a parent-child or adult-youth partnership approach to teach the importance of boundary setting and social competence in managing boundaries in various environments. This program intentionally incorporates key protective factors outlined in the ACYF Protective Factors Framework, including regulation of a child's behavior through limits and reasoning, support of parenting competencies, development of healthy parent-child connections, and encouragement of positive youth life skills. We evaluated *Boundaries*, and the research reported here presents the findings and recommendations for improving the program.

Pilot Study Outline and Methods

Boundaries and *Boundaries Jr.* were engaged in a multi-year pilot phase of program testing and refinement at the time of the study. The pilot phase included several trainings for Extension agents and other community partners, as well as the development of a set of program evaluation measures. Duncan and Goddard (2017) encouraged formative evaluation of programs at this point, advising, "At a pilot testing stage, it is appropriate for family life educators to administer a brief questionnaire at the end of each session and ask whether the participants learned something new, what were the strengths in the program, and suggestions for improvement" (p. 46). The purpose of this study was to conduct a formative evaluation of initial outcomes in *Boundaries* during its pilot phase, focusing on participant satisfaction, knowledge of program content, and open-ended program feedback. To further understand participant experiences in the program, the following research questions were formed and then explored:

1. How do youth and adult participants in *Boundaries* perceive the program relative to presentation, content, and instructor effectiveness?
2. What effects does participation in *Boundaries* have on youth and adult participants relative to knowledge of program content regarding boundaries and social competence?
3. What information would youth and adult participants in *Boundaries* share regarding the program experience and suggestions via open-ended feedback questions?

This section provides a detailed description of the program, study design, participants, evaluation measures, data collection procedures, and data analysis protocol.

Description of the *Boundaries* Program

Program Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of *Boundaries* was to increase the knowledge and skills of youth and adult participants relative to boundary setting, negotiation, and social competence in relationships. Four overarching program objectives guided both curricula. Upon completion of either curriculum, participants should be able to

- Recognize why boundaries are important,
- Understand how boundaries reflect personal and social values across many contexts,
- Identify and manage negotiable and non-negotiable boundaries in relationships and contexts, and
- Respectfully work through disagreements or boundary concerns with authority figures and others.

These objectives were intended to develop life skills and improve protective factors for youth and adults who participated in the program.

Curricula Overview

Both curricula were structured into five interactive educational sessions designed to be taught over five consecutive weeks. Each session incorporated a variety of teaching methods to facilitate learning. For example, participants engaged in icebreakers, guided discussions, video clips, hands-on learning activities such as role-playing and group brainstorming, and take-home assignments. Learning sessions typically lasted 60 to 90 minutes.

During the first two sessions of both *Boundaries* and *Boundaries Jr.*, youth and their parents participated in the sessions together. For the third and fourth sessions, youth and their parents came together initially but then participated in separate educational sessions. Finally, the fifth session brought all of the participants back together. Table 1 provides an outline of the learning framework for each session.

Both curricula included descriptions of how to deliver each of the five sessions and examples of promotional materials. In addition, each session's lesson plan included a list of the materials needed, a complete explanation of how to deliver all of the activities, including what the facilitator should say, and a list of questions to engage further discussion about the session's topic.

Program Pilot Implementation

Boundaries was introduced to NDSU Extension staff through the 4-H youth development program, and an initial test site was selected to pilot the program. The project's pilot phase

included discussion and agreement with community leaders at the pilot site to support the program, training of Extension staff and community leaders to guide and facilitate the program, and implementation of the curriculum on a yearly basis. The program facilitators were trained in *Boundaries* content, engagement practices with youth and adults, implementation, and usage of pilot evaluation measures.

Participants of the Program and Recruitment

Youth and their parents were the intended audience, and typically they were recruited to participate through local partnership efforts supporting youth development and healthy families. A site that is comfortable for youth, such as a middle or high school, a faith community setting, or a youth-serving location such as a YMCA location, was designated as the educational setting. Youth and their families were sent information about the program through established community networks or connections formed through local schools, juvenile justice programs, faith-based groups, and youth-serving programs, such as 4-H, afterschool programs, or the YMCA. This recruitment approach encouraged support and participation from youth-serving organizations and groups within the community while emphasizing the involvement of both youth and their parents.

Table 1. Learning Framework for Boundaries

Session	Audience	Topic	Objectives
1	Youth and Adults	Boundaries, Boundaries, Boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why boundaries are important. • Boundaries are a reflection of values. • Boundaries extend into all areas of life.
2	Youth and Adults	Boundaries Are Everywhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rules are set in a variety of environments and may change among environments. • Discern which values rules represent. • Rationales behind specific rules.
3	Adults	Parenting Styles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the parenting style of their parents. • Identify their parenting style. • Understand the four basic parenting styles, their impacts on children, and how to use them.
3	Youth	Working Alongside Authority/Adults in Charge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify authority figures/adults in charge in their lives. • Understand authority figures/adults in charge change with increased responsibility. • Identify negotiable and non-negotiable rules in their lives. • Learn how to work through disagreements with authority figures/adults in charge respectfully.

Session	Audience	Topic	Objectives
4	Adults	Setting Rules for Teens/Preteens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the basics of adolescent brain development. • Understand four major changes in adolescents. • Gain skills in setting boundaries and consequences with teens/preteens.
4	Youth	Setting Your Own Boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify why setting boundaries is healthy. • Understand how to make living by boundaries easier to do. • Understand the process of internalizing values. • Understand actions define us to others.
5	Youth and Adults	Setting Family Rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand each family is unique and will have different values and perspectives. • Understand how to set, change, and negotiate rules in a family setting. • Understand rules should be respected even if you disagree with them. • Understand rules, choices, and consequences.

Note. Adapted from Query et al. (2012, 2016).

Participants in *Boundaries* were school-age youth (7th to 12th grades) and adult caregivers, typically parents and their adolescent children, who resided in the region of the pilot site. Approximately 80 youth and 70 adults ($N = 150$ total participants) completed either *Boundaries* or *Boundaries Jr.* in nine pilot sessions of the program at the time of the study.

Study Design

This pilot study utilized a formative evaluation process with a single-group, post-session retrospective survey design in which participants completed session questionnaires. This process was used to provide a simple, practical approach to assess the effectiveness of primary program objectives, gather information about responses to each session of the overall program, and deal with a lack of familiarity regarding program content among participants (Nimon et al., 2011). This approach was the simplest to implement in a local community setting with staff having limited evaluation skills, while at the same time, increasing the feedback gathered from participants. The study design also met the need for a simple but useful pilot evaluation that provided initial information on program implementation and participant responses. The pilot study design and measures were reviewed and approved by the North Dakota State University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Population and Participants in the Study

In this study, *Boundaries* was explored after the pilot implementation phase that focused on data collection from pilot site participants. The target population for the study was youth and adults who participated in the program at a pilot site over a period of five years. During this time, there were nine pilot sessions of the program, and the total program population consisted of 80 youth and 70 adults ($N = 150$). For recruitment into the study, program facilitators at the pilot site were invited to voluntarily administer the program session questionnaires each time a full session of the program was delivered. However, not all pilot sessions opted to collect evaluation data. There were six (out of nine) complete pilot sessions conducted that furnished preliminary evaluation data. Only sessions of *Boundaries* (7th to 12th grades) gathered pilot evaluation data, and 55 youth and 48 adults participated in these program sessions. In the six pilot sessions where youth and adult participants were invited to complete session questionnaires, 30 youth and 37 adults responded to the invitation to participate in the study. The overall response rate was 54.5% (30 out of 55) for youth and 77.1% (37 out of 48) for adults. However, the response rate varied slightly across differing program sessions (see Demographics and Program Operations under Findings for session-based response rates).

Since participation in the study aspect of the program was voluntary, non-responders were provided with session questionnaires but could leave them uncompleted. Incentives were not provided for completing the session questionnaires. To follow up and encourage a higher response rate, participants were encouraged to complete questionnaires for previous sessions if they had not already completed them. No further follow-up efforts were used.

Pilot Evaluation Measures

In the pilot implementation phase of *Boundaries*, evaluation measures were used to assess participant satisfaction and emerging impacts. The pilot evaluation measures consisted of a set of short, retrospective questionnaires about the general effectiveness of each session's objectives that were adapted for each of the five sessions of the program. In addition to these single-session questionnaires, a set of pre, post, and follow-up evaluations for each version of the curriculum was developed and pilot tested. Results from the evaluation process were intended for use in refining and strengthening the quality of both curricula. Further details about the process and content of the pilot evaluation measures utilized in this study are reported here.

Each of the five program sessions had two corresponding questionnaires, one for youth and one for adults. Thus, in total, there were ten single-session questionnaires, five for youth and five for adults. The retrospective session questionnaires employed in this pilot study were original and developed specifically for the program, based on the content and objectives of *Boundaries*. The program developers partnered with a university-level program evaluation specialist to clearly discern program objectives, explore assessment needs appropriate to the pilot phase of the program, and design the ten single-session questionnaires.

The questions for each short retrospective questionnaire were designed to gather demographic, program satisfaction, and content knowledge information. Each session questionnaire included three demographic questions (age, youth or adult, program site location), three program satisfaction questions, and between three and five content knowledge questions pertinent to the particular session, as well as open-ended questions for feedback.

For purposes of the pilot study, face validity of each single-session questionnaire was reviewed in an initial pilot session by five pilot study team members, five youth participants, and five adult participants. Each was asked to review whether questions accurately reflected content focused on in the session. Written feedback was gathered and reviewed, with a few minor adjustments to the wording of the content knowledge questions. Subsequently, content validity for each questionnaire was reviewed by five pilot study team members who independently assessed whether content knowledge questions accurately represented session content. Team members met to discuss their review efforts and either revised, added, or dropped questions based on team review and consensus. In addition, three pilot study team members with graduate degrees in topics related to the curriculum (psychology, youth development, human development and family science) reviewed session content and evaluation questions for construct validity. Reliability for measures was not computed since items were assessed as single items and not multi-item constructs. Specific elements of the questionnaires are described below.

Demographic Questions

Demographic items included age, youth or adult status, and program site location. Age was asked as a single, open-ended response item but coded as one of six age range options (ages 8–11, 12–19, 20–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59 or older). Youth or adult status was assessed as a dichotomous variable. Program site location was assessed as a single, open-ended response item. These questions remained the same on all questionnaires.

Program Satisfaction Questions

The three program satisfaction questions were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*not effective*) to 5 (*very effective*) and specifically asked about presentation style, session content, and instructor effectiveness. These questions remained the same on all questionnaires.

Content Knowledge Questions

Each of the content knowledge questions specific to a particular session was assessed using a retrospective, self-report question on a 5-point Likert-type scale of understanding from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*absolutely*). As noted, each session evaluation contained three to five content knowledge questions specific to the content shared in that session. These questions remained the same for youth and adults for the three sessions in which they participated together, while the

questions were different for youth and adults in the two sessions in which they were separated and exposed to different content.

Open-ended Feedback

Each session evaluation included three open-ended questions that focused on the most important items learned, one thing the participant would change in the session, and other general comments. These questions remained the same on all questionnaires.

Data Collection Procedures

A uniform series of brief retrospective, self-report questionnaires were created for youth and adult participants in each single session of *Boundaries*. The questionnaire materials were prepared in the English language. Program facilitators for the program at the pilot site were trained in administering the questionnaires in a consistent manner. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be youth or adults who attended individual sessions of *Boundaries* at the program pilot site. Program evaluation questionnaires were provided to site personnel to be administered in-person to participants at the end of each session of the five-week program. At the end of each session, 15 minutes were reserved for session evaluation. Participants were invited to voluntarily complete the questionnaire for the session. Paper copies of the session questionnaire and writing instruments were made available to youth and adult participants. Those who chose to participate completed the questionnaire voluntarily and returned it directly to the program facilitators, who then put it directly into an envelope. Pilot site program facilitators managed the process of gaining informed consent during this process by sharing and reading an informed consent document to participants. They also managed distributing the questionnaires and collecting them from youth and adult participants. Once participant pilot questionnaires were collected for a single session, the program facilitators held them until the end of the five-week program. Then, all questionnaires were sent to the Center for 4-H Youth Development at NDSU for analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data collected were from youth and adult participants who were encouraged to complete a retrospective, self-report questionnaire at the end of each single session. Participant responses on each session questionnaire were entered into IBM SPSS Statistics 26 for management and data analysis. Respondent demographic responses were summarized using descriptive statistics. Program satisfaction data for both youth and adults were assessed using descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations. For the content knowledge questions, the data were first checked to assess whether basic statistical assumptions were met for planned analysis techniques. Once this was confirmed, the data were analyzed using a paired samples *t*-test analysis, and mean scores for each item were compared statistically to investigate if differences existed for pre- and post-session scores.

For the open-ended feedback questions, all responses were entered using the same statistical software program by a project research assistant. Trustworthiness of the data was confirmed in multiple ways. All comment responses were reviewed for accuracy of transcription by two project researchers. Participant responses to each of the three open-ended feedback questions were grouped for analysis, and an initial thematic code was assigned to each comment by a project research assistant. The assigned codes were then tallied to see which codes were repeated most frequently in the participant responses. If an assigned thematic code was mentioned as a topic in 20% or more of the total comments for a specific question, then it was identified as a major thematic code. Then, two project researchers independently reviewed the thematic codes for each comment and either confirmed the initial code or modified it. They then met and compared the individual reviews of thematic coding for each question and found a 93% match in codes assigned. This process enhanced the confirmability of the study findings. Transferability of the open-ended feedback was facilitated by using direct comments from participants to illustrate the key findings gained through open-ended feedback questions.

Findings

The demographic, program satisfaction, and content knowledge information were gathered during the pilot study using single-session, retrospective questionnaires. A summary of the data collected and analyzed from the pilot study examination of *Boundaries* is included here.

Demographics and Program Operations

Regarding program operations, pilot data were gathered from the six complete pilot sessions of *Boundaries* offered in the same county location over a five-year period. The same program facilitation team offered the program each time. Since the pilot evaluation data consisted of single-session evaluations, the number of participants reported is dependent on responses shared by attendees in each single session offered across multiple full pilot sessions of *Boundaries*. Response rates on specific items varied slightly from session response rates for all data. All available pilot data for each single-session evaluation were combined across the six pilot efforts. Specific information on content for each single session is shown in Table 1.

For Session 1 (data from five pilot sessions), there were 23 youth (39.7%) and 35 adults (60.3%) who provided feedback ($N = 58$). Among respondents for Session 1, the age groups were ages 8–11 ($n = 6$, 10.3%), ages 12–19 ($n = 17$, 29.3%), ages 30–39 ($n = 16$, 27.6%), ages 40–49 ($n = 13$, 22.4%), and ages 50–59 or older ($n = 6$, 10.3%). For this specific session, response rates were 50.0% for youth and 87.5% for adults.

For Session 2 (data from five pilot sessions), there were an equivalent number of 30 youth and 30 adults ($N = 60$). Breakdown of ages were 8–11 ($n = 6$, 10.0%), 12–19 ($n = 24$, 40.0%), 30–39 ($n = 12$, 20.0%), 40–49 ($n = 12$, 20.0%), and 50–59 or older ($n = 5$, 8.3%) (1 missing). For this specific session, response rates were 65.2% for youth and 75.0% for adults.

For Session 3 (data from six pilot sessions), 26 youth (41.3%) and 37 adults (58.7%) responded ($N = 63$). Age groups included ages 8–11 ($n = 6$, 9.5%), ages 12–19 ($n = 20$, 31.7%), ages 30–39 ($n = 16$, 25.4%), ages 40–49 ($n = 12$, 19.0%), and ages 50–59 or older ($n = 7$, 11.1%) (2 missing). For this specific session, response rates were 47.3% for youth and 77.1% for adults.

For Session 4 (data from four pilot sessions), respondents included 22 youth (59.5%) and 15 adults (40.5%) ($N = 37$). The age groups were 8–11 ($n = 5$, 13.5%), 12–19 ($n = 17$, 45.9%), 30–39 ($n = 10$, 27.0%), 40–49 ($n = 4$, 10.8%), and 50–59 or older ($n = 1$, 2.7%). For this specific session, response rates were 59.5% for youth and 46.9% for adults.

For Session 5 (data from four pilot sessions), there were 16 youth (44.4%) and 20 adults (55.6%) who gave feedback ($N = 36$). Age groups were 8–11 ($n = 5$, 13.9%), 12–19 ($n = 11$, 30.6%), 30–39 ($n = 9$, 25.0%), 40–49 ($n = 8$, 22.2%), and 50–59 or older ($n = 2$, 5.6%) (1 missing). For this specific session, response rates were 43.2% for youth and 62.5% for adults.

Program Satisfaction

Both youth and adults involved in *Boundaries* expressed positive satisfaction levels with the individual program sessions, which were assessed on three questions with responses that ranged from 1 (*not effective*) to 5 (*very effective*). The three categories that respondents rated were presentation, content, and instructor effectiveness. Mean scores and standard deviations are shown, but statistical comparisons were not made between youth and adults (Table 2). However, youth consistently shared lower ratings than adults across all three categories and varied more widely in their ratings. Adults were highly consistent in their mean scores across categories and sessions. Youth scores were elevated somewhat in Session 3 and Session 4 when youth and adults were separated into different groups.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Program Satisfaction Responses from Youth and Adults

Session	Audience	n	Presentation M (SD)	Content M (SD)	Instructor M (SD)
1	Youth	23	4.17 (1.03)	3.91 (0.95)	4.35 (0.71)
	Adults	35	4.60 (0.60)	4.60 (0.60)	4.66 (0.59)
2	Youth	30	4.36 (0.62)	3.89 (0.83)	4.35 (0.69)
	Adults	30	4.62 (0.62)	4.66 (0.55)	4.69 (0.54)
3	Youth	26	4.42 (0.76)	4.27 (0.87)	4.54 (0.76)
	Adults	37	4.42 (0.73)	4.63 (0.55)	4.54 (0.70)
4	Youth	22	4.24 (0.77)	4.29 (0.72)	4.48 (0.87)
	Adults	15	4.80 (0.41)	4.87 (0.35)	4.87 (0.35)
5	Youth	16	3.62 (1.31)	3.88 (1.15)	3.88 (1.15)
	Adults	20	4.45 (0.76)	4.45 (0.76)	4.40 (0.82)

Perceived Effects on Content Knowledge

For each session of *Boundaries*, youth and adults were invited to complete a brief set of content knowledge questions that focused on their understanding of the material covered. A 5-point scale ranging from 1 to 5 was used for self-reporting, with a higher score indicating a greater understanding of the session's content. All questions were the same for participants in Session 1, Session 2, and Session 5, while they differed somewhat in Session 3 and Session 4 since youth and adults learned different content in those sessions. Again, youth and adults were not compared statistically, but the retrospective session evaluations suggested that both youth and adult participants gained knowledge and understanding related to the objectives for each session. The available data were checked and found to meet basic statistical assumptions. Then, a paired samples *t*-test analysis ($p < .05$) was performed, and mean scores for each content knowledge item were compared to assess if differences existed from pre- to post-session scores.

For Session 1 (Boundaries, Boundaries, Boundaries), three content knowledge questions were asked and responses gathered from 53 participants. For all three items, there were significant knowledge differences between the initial score and post-session score, including boundary importance [$M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.07$; $M = 4.51$, $SD = 0.72$; $t(52) = -8.32$, $p = .000$], boundaries as values [$M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.04$; $M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.87$; $t(52) = -7.76$, $p = .000$], and breadth of boundaries [$M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.02$; $M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.68$; $t(52) = -6.56$, $p = .000$]. Each of these increases in mean knowledge scores represents a 17% to 22% increase in content knowledge for the participants.

Similarly, for Session 2 (Boundaries Are Everywhere), three content knowledge questions were asked, and responses were received from 53 participants. For these items, *t*-test comparisons showed that mean knowledge scores for all content items increased and were significantly different from pre- to post-session score. Items measured included knowledge of boundaries and rule changes [$M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.96$; $M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.61$; $t(52) = -6.20$, $p = .000$], rules and value judgments [$M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.89$; $M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.61$; $t(52) = -7.78$, $p = .000$], and reasoning behind rules or boundaries [$M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.78$; $M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.63$; $t(52) = -7.23$, $p = .000$]. Again, each of these increases in mean knowledge scores represents a 17% to 22% increase in content knowledge for the participants.

As previously noted, both Session 3 and Session 4 engaged youth and adults separately, covering different content. Initial findings shared are distinct for the youth and the adults.

For youth in Session 3, content focused on working with authority figures and negotiating disagreements. Responses were shared by 23 youth on four items, and *t*-test comparisons showed significant differences between pre- and post-session scores for each item, including awareness of authority figures [$M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.38$; $M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.79$; $t(22) = -3.94$, $p = .001$], learning responsibility [$M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.07$; $M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.73$; $t(22) = -4.61$, $p = .000$], negotiation of rules [$M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.18$; $M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.88$; $t(22) = -4.70$, $p = .000$], and working through

disagreements [$M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.16$; $M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.89$; $t(22) = -5.52$, $p = .000$]. Thus, youth showed a 25% to 40% gain in content knowledge for the session. For adults ($n = 36$), there were five content questions and each showed statistically significant gains between pre- and post-session scores, all of which related to adult understanding of parenting styles: identifying the parenting style of one's parents [$M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.01$; $M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.55$; $t(35) = -6.10$, $p = .000$], identifying one's own parenting style [$M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.90$; $M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.57$; $t(35) = -6.80$, $p = .000$], understanding the four basic parenting styles [$M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.11$; $M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.64$; $t(35) = -7.79$, $p = .000$], understanding how one's parenting style impacts children's behavior [$M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.97$; $M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.56$; $t(35) = -6.91$, $p = .000$], and understanding that parenting style is a choice [$M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.97$; $M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.50$; $t(35) = -6.56$, $p = .000$]. Therefore, the adults showed an increase in content knowledge from 26% to 40%.

Youth in Session 4 ($n = 21$) received four content questions, and there were significant knowledge gains for each item, including setting healthy boundaries [$M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.87$; $M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.51$; $t(20) = -4.99$, $p = .000$], boundary adherence [$M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.07$; $M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.75$; $t(20) = -5.44$, $p = .000$], internalizing values [$M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.16$; $M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.87$; $t(20) = -5.29$, $p = .000$], and importance of actions [$M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.12$; $M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.80$; $t(20) = -4.56$, $p = .000$]. Each of these increases in mean knowledge scores represents a 20% to 37% increase in content knowledge for the youth. Finally, for adults in Session 4 ($n = 15$), three content questions were posed, and the pre- and post-score differences were each statistically significant. The knowledge differences focused on awareness of teen brain development [$M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.92$; $M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.74$; $t(14) = -6.14$, $p = .000$], adolescent changes and boundaries [$M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.92$; $M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.72$; $t(14) = -4.94$, $p = .000$], and skills in boundary setting and consequences [$M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.83$; $M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.63$; $t(14) = -3.60$, $p = .003$]. These increases in mean knowledge scores for the adults represent a 22% to 41% increase in content knowledge.

Session 5 (Setting Family Rules) again engaged youth and adults together, and five content questions were asked and responded to by 34 participants. The t -test comparisons for these items showed that there were significant differences in knowledge reported between the pre- and post-session scores for all five items. These differences were found for the items including family diversity and values [$M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.97$; $M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.71$; $t(33) = -4.45$, $p = .000$], setting and negotiating family boundaries [$M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.88$; $M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.80$; $t(33) = -9.82$, $p = .000$], respect for boundaries [$M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.24$; $M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.71$; $t(33) = -5.48$, $p = .000$], the purpose of boundaries [$M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.12$; $M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.75$; $t(33) = -4.19$, $p = .000$], and boundary violations and consequences [$M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.91$; $M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.70$; $t(33) = -4.23$, $p = .000$]. Each of these increases in mean knowledge scores represents an 11% to 29% increase in content knowledge for the participants.

This set of findings from the pilot study data on *Boundaries* suggests that self-reported knowledge levels for specific content items showed increases for before-and-after mean comparisons that were significant. These findings are promising and suggest the value of pursuing further investigation regarding the potential impacts of *Boundaries*. In addition to these initial findings drawn from retrospective evaluation tools, the more rigorous set of pre, post, and follow-up evaluation measures gathered additional information about potential program impacts on youth and their families.

Open-Ended Feedback Results

At the end of each session questionnaire, participants were asked to respond to the same three open-ended questions via a text prompt for all five sessions. The questions included: (a) list the three most important things you learned, (b) one thing I would change about this session, and (c) any other comments you would like to make. Responses to these questions were grouped and analyzed for key themes that emerged from the participants' answers.

Important Things Learned

Participants identified three key things they learned from each session. Understandably, the themes that emerged from this question related directly to the topics of the five different sessions. The three key themes were: Boundaries/Rules, Parenting, and Communication.

First, participants indicated they learned about boundaries and rule-setting, stating they understood that boundaries were very important and that they were found in all aspects of life. Consistency of boundary enforcement was emphasized as important, as one adult participant stated, "It's important to be consistent as parents on how we discipline." A youth gave another rule-focused comment saying, "Rules are a good thing and serve a purpose." Second, adult participants stated they learned about parenting and need to be aware of their role to be effective. One stated, "I cannot be 'cool' or be a 'friend' to be an effective parent." Others noted that their parenting style affects their children's behavior, and that parenting styles may differ from generation to generation. In fact, one parent said, "You can reteach yourself things that your parents may have taught you in areas of parenting," reinforcing the idea that learning about parenting and its application to managing boundaries is important. Third, participants reflected that joint communication between parents and children regarding different issues is important, and that negotiation facilitates discussion between them. One youth stated, "I should and can negotiate with my parents," and one parent commented, "Give teens more room to negotiate boundaries."

Of particular interest emerging specifically from the youth-only sessions were two additional themes, Authority Figures and Actions. The youth indicated they better understood "who authorities are" and that "authority figures have power over us," as well as how to work with authority figures. They also learned that their "actions define [them] to those who view [them]"

and “their actions affect their future,” consistent with the program’s emphasis on boundaries as a reflection of values.

Things to Change About the Program

Two themes emerged from the participants’ responses when asked what they would change about the program, Time and Structure. Participants wanted the five sessions to last longer, as additional time would provide opportunities for more discussion. One participant commented, “Lengthen the session ... more than one hour,” while another said, “More conversations on particular problems.” As evidenced by these and other comments, participants wanted more time allotted for each session. The program was structured such that the first two sessions and the last session allowed both youth and parents to work together. However, Session 3 and Session 4 allowed for the youth and parents to participate in separate groups. Participant comments were divided regarding this structure. Some participants wanted more of the sessions divided into separate groups for youth and adults. One participant said, “Split kids and adults for periods of time. Might get more information from kids,” supporting the program’s structure, while on the other hand, other participants did not like the separation. “The separation of families causes children’s comments to be held from parents,” commented one parent. Overall, participants also wanted the program’s structure to include more activities during the sessions, including “more videos and more games.”

General Comments

Comments shared were positive, with four themes emerging from participants’ responses: Enjoyment, Beneficial for Schools, Comfortable and Welcoming Environment, and Additional Programming Requested. The first and third themes related to the quality of the program experience, with participants indicating they enjoyed the experience and that the environment was positive and comfortable. The second and fourth themes indicated participant interest in further extending the program by sharing it with schools and other community organizations or following up with similar programming. The following participant comments provide support for these four themes:

- “Awesome! I loved the resources. They kept the kids entertained.”
- “Please come to the school and present this program for the teachers!”
- “Awesome staff. The openness of the class makes me comfortable and makes me feel welcome.”
- “I was wondering if you have more parenting classes after this class?”

Comments from the youth and adult participants in response to the open-ended questions included in the retrospective session evaluations indicate how involvement in *Boundaries* impacted them. These comments shared by youth and adults further suggest that the program

influenced participants' attitudes and awareness regarding boundary setting, negotiation, and working through these issues in socially competent ways.

Summary

Overall, participation was good across all five sessions of *Boundaries* for both youth and adults. Most youth participants identified themselves in the 12–19 age category, while most adults were ages 30–39. In general, the response rates were higher for adults than for youth on all of the retrospective questionnaires. Both youth and adults expressed positive levels of satisfaction with the individual program sessions, as they rated presentation, session content, and quality of instruction favorably. However, adults consistently rated items higher than youth. Interestingly, youth scores were elevated in Session 3 and Session 4 when they were separated from the adults. When considering the content knowledge gained from the sessions, both youth and adult participants gained knowledge and understanding related to the objectives for all of the sessions. Participants' mean scores ranged from an 11% to 41% increase in content knowledge across items assessed from all five sessions. Participants commented that learning to set boundaries, communicating needs between youth and adults about navigating boundaries in life, and understanding the role parents and other adults play in facilitating and guiding youth in boundary-setting were the main takeaways from *Boundaries*. These three program takeaways indicated that the program achieved its objectives, including recognizing and understanding the impact of boundaries and rules, identifying and managing boundaries in relationships, and respectfully working through disagreements or boundary concerns with authority figures. Overall, participants found *Boundaries* to be enjoyable and beneficial, as both youth and adults asked for more time in the sessions and wanted additional programming opportunities to be offered.

Program Limitations

Limited data are available for both *Boundaries* and *Boundaries Jr.* due to slow progress in pilot testing, thus limiting program implementation. Both curricula require extensive planning and multiple personnel to execute, and program participants are asked to participate in multiple sessions. Extension agents are often asked to deliver single-meeting programs due to time constraints, limited resources, and participant commitment. As a result, *Boundaries* and *Boundaries Jr.* have not yet been implemented enough to gather robust data, and therefore both are still in the pilot phase. Further training sessions are planned to train Extension agents and community partners on both curricula, which will hopefully stimulate awareness and give the agents the tools needed to implement both. Because of the limited data collected using the retrospective evaluations for each session, we have not been able to conduct an in-depth evaluation of either curriculum. However, we hope that data collected from the recently developed pre, post, and follow-up evaluations will provide insight on ways to strengthen both curricula. Thus far, the data collected point toward positive results.

Program Implementation and Key Practices

Implementation of both *Boundaries* and *Boundaries Jr.* offers an opportunity to build healthier relationships between youth and their parents, deliver programming focused on protective factors for youth, and enhance 4-H program offerings. Several suggestions for successful implementation are included here:

- It is important to identify and collaborate with community partners who are interested in programs for youth and parents that address youth protective factors. In this case, the protective factors focus on family connectedness, youth life skills, regulation of youth behavior, and healthy youth decision making. As a case example, the original group of partners that conceptualized *Boundaries* included the county Extension agent, Mercer County Youth Bureau, a local ministerial association, and local law enforcement personnel. Forming a program committee comprised of individuals in the community with a background or interest in youth development is helpful. The committee also serves as a group from which to draw facilitators to implement and promote the program in the community.
- Addressing training, timing, and location needs to ensure successful implementation is important. Make sure that key facilitators are trained and are comfortable with the content, learning activities, and program delivery. Timing is important in order to maximize support from partners such as local schools, youth ministry programs, and others who may offer activities involving youth and their parents. Facility use may include the county Extension office. However, if the program is delivered in a community apart from the county Extension office, a school or library could be good, minimal, or no-cost options that typically have video equipment available.
- Targeted recruitment is critical for the successful implementation of either version of the program. Both curricula target both youth and their parents. Since *Boundaries* (7th through 12th grades) and *Boundaries Jr.* (3rd through 6th grades) were each written for a somewhat wide age range, it can be helpful to target smaller age groups, such as youth in 7th through 9th grades and then youth in 10th and 11th grades. Participants are typically recruited through referrals from local schools, law enforcement agencies, or youth-serving agencies. Also, invitation letters could be sent to all age-appropriate youth and their families in the schools in the community where the program is being offered. Additionally, announcements should be placed in local media outlets and shared with local faith communities and community centers to reach other youth and their families who live in the community but may attend a different school or be schooled at home.
- Consistent effort and follow-up are important in making *Boundaries* and *Boundaries Jr.* work for youth and their families. Since the program is more intensive than a one-shot program and involves youth and their families, getting started may require a greater commitment of energy and time. However, the results of this study suggest

that both curricula are effective in serving as a common point of focus for youth community support and in delivering effective programming focusing on youth protective factors.

- Retention and engagement of program participants are concerns for any youth development or parent education program. Research suggests that enrolled participants in programs similar to *Boundaries* attend only one-third to one-half of available sessions (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). We implemented strategies for retention and engagement that focused on four key practices based on recommendations by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2016). These were (a) train and use local community facilitators trusted by parents and youth for program delivery, (b) engage youth and parents in a rewarding educational experience by implementing the experiential learning model, (c) lower barriers to continued participation by careful scheduling that fits with family needs and by offering child care, and (d) implement peer support and connection for both youth and parents. Implementation of these strategies helped with our program success, as over 70% of enrolled participants attended all sessions.

Both *Boundaries* and *Boundaries Jr.* offer multi-faceted educational opportunities that can be effectively used in 4-H youth development work. In addition, potential partners include schools, Scouting organizations, Boys and Girls Clubs, juvenile justice programs, youth ministry groups, and other youth-serving entities.

Conclusion

Because youth often are still developing the maturity to make good decisions on their own, they require firm guidance and support from parents to reach adulthood successfully (NIMH, 2020). The ACYF Protective Factors Framework combined with the 4-H Targeting Life Skills Model were used to create a youth and family education program targeting both boundary setting and social competence. Both *Boundaries* and *Boundaries Jr.* offer guidance in boundary setting and negotiation in parent-child relationships and related contexts while incorporating key protective factors that can offset the effects of unhealthy influences and foster resiliency in youth.

Overall, both youth and adult participants gained knowledge and understanding related to the objectives for all of the sessions. This finding relates to one of the skill competency areas outlined in the 4-H Targeting Life Skills Model, Head, as youth and adults increased their knowledge competencies (Hendricks, 1998; Norman & Jordan, 2018). When considering how satisfied youth and adults were with *Boundaries*, participants rated all sessions favorably. Program satisfaction coupled with knowledge gain are indicative of program success. This finding is supported by Shaw (2014), who noted that programs targeting specific developmental topics are more successful than programs addressing a broad range of issues. The program's success could also be supported by the strategies for retention and engagement from the National

Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2016), as we used local facilitators, implemented the experiential learning model, used careful scheduling to fit the needs of families, and implemented peer support by connecting families.

Based on initial feedback from the pilot study evaluation, *Boundaries* proved to be an effective program for the participants and achieved the overarching objectives. However, there are opportunities for future research. We would like to conduct *Boundaries* with a more heterogeneous group of youth and adults in a longitudinal study design. Additionally, implementing a more rigorous study design utilizing a comparison group would allow for more robust and generalizable findings. Conducting qualitative research on some of the quantitative findings would allow for a deeper exploration of the findings. Finally, the more rigorous set of pre, post, and follow-up evaluation measures developed will provide insight on ways to strengthen both curricula. These fuller program measures assess more detailed content knowledge, youth life skills, youth-adult communication and relationships, and attitudes toward the program.

Overall, the pilot evaluation data gathered illustrate the program's positive impact on both youth and their families. Developed originally to fill the need in a small community in North Dakota, *Boundaries* shows the potential for guiding youth and adults in boundary setting and the development of social competence in family life and other settings. The program curriculum for both *Boundaries* and *Boundaries Jr.* is available through NDSU Extension and the [Extension Foundation](#) (2021) online course catalog. With roots in 4-H youth development and the broader frameworks of youth protective factors and youth life skills, *Boundaries* aims to reach youth and their families beyond North Dakota to further positive youth development nationwide.

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