

Ohio START Parent Interview Findings

August 2024



OHIO
UNIVERSITY

Voinovich School of
Leadership and Public Service

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Public Children Services Association of Ohio for entrusting us with this evaluation activity, especially approving access to parents served by Ohio START (Sobriety Treatment and Reducing Trauma). We would also like to thank the START staff serving families throughout Ohio for their services, as well as their assistance with recruiting parents for the interviews discussed in this document. We are humbled by the accomplishments of so many involved in the overall effort to assist families affected by substance use disorder and especially humbled by the many parents we spoke to who have made dramatic changes in their lives. The researchers involved in this report include Margaret Hutzler, Robin Webb, Katarina Kroutel and Gretchen Sahr.

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Primary Findings.....	1
DETAILED FINDINGS.....	3
Previous CPS Experience.....	3
Perceptions of Family Peer Mentors.....	4
High Accessibility to Family Peer Mentor.....	7
Pursuing Substance Use Disorder Field.....	9
General Employment Assistance.....	9
More Present and Affectionate.....	10
Prolonged or Saved Life.....	12
Overall Outlook.....	13
CONCLUSION.....	15
DEMOGRAPHICS.....	16
RECRUITMENT AND PROCESS.....	17
REFERENCES.....	18

Executive Summary

Introduction

Between the fall of 2020 and the spring of 2024, evaluators from Ohio University's Voinovich School for Leadership and Public Service conducted semi structured phone interviews with parents who successfully graduated from Ohio START. The study intended to explore any changes in parenting attitudes and practices among parents after successfully completing Ohio START (PCSAO, n.d.). Another purpose was to explore what aspects of the program, the parents found helpful (PCSAO, 2019).

This interview sample consists of 60 parents who completed Ohio START between June 2020 and June 2024 and self-selected to participate in an interview with the Ohio University research team. An initial analysis of the first 34 interviews, was conducted in the fall of 2022 and reported key findings from the interviews that included positive changes to their parenting, their own mental and physical health, and the well-being of the family (Yoon et al., 2024). Since that time, 26 additional parent interviews have been conducted. The analysis of the additional 26 interviews reinforced the findings first reported, and further, the larger data set presented evaluators with the opportunity to examine additional sub-themes more closely. A review of the key findings from the first report would provide beneficial context, though it is not necessary. What follows is a qualitative and quantitative analysis of those themes and sub-themes. As noted, the sample consists of parents who chose to participate in an interview with the evaluators which is a limitation of this study as the experiences and perceptions of these families may not reflect the entirety of the parents who participated in the program.

Throughout this document are quotes from interviewed parents. We have applied fictitious names to protect parents' identities and each parent has the same fictitious name if they are quoted more than once. The quotes are in the parents' own words and help to illustrate the concept presented.

Primary Findings



Enhanced Parenting:

- Interviews show that participants have improved parenting, including emotional accessibility, and they are more present and affectionate with their children upon completion of Ohio START. Parents engaged more in quality activities, providing better emotional support and reliability.



Positive Impact of Family Peer Mentors:

- Parents experience compassionate and supportive wraparound help from Family Peer Mentors (FPMs).

- Nearly all parents reported positive experiences with their FPMs, who provided extensive support ranging from transportation to emotional support. This supportive relationship often extended beyond the program duration.
- FPMs were highly valued for their compassionate support. The FPMs provide extremely high accessibility to the parents with whom they are working. Specifically, many parents indicate the FPM has stated they can be contacted by text or phone call at any time.



Comparison with General Child Protective Services (CPS):

- The Ohio START approach is perceived as substantially different than the general Child Protective Service approach among nearly all parents who had a prior CPS case.
- Nearly half (45%) of the parents had prior CPS experience and found Ohio START substantially more supportive. Unlike general CPS, Ohio START was seen as encouraging family unity rather than threatening separation.



Life-Saving Impact:

- Almost one fifth of interviewed parents explicitly stated that Ohio START saved or prolonged their lives, highlighting the program's critical role in their recovery journey.



Improved Outlook and Attitude:

- Sixty-five percent of parents had a positive shift in their outlook on life, experiencing increased self-confidence, independence, and a more positive vision for the future. Many expressed gratitude for the support received, which helped rebuild trust in public services.

Ohio START has had a profound impact on participating parents, fostering better parenting practices and offering substantial emotional and practical support through Family Peer Mentors. The program has not only facilitated recovery from substance use disorder but also contributed to family stability and a renewed sense of purpose among parents.

Carol:

"I've been able to bond with her, not just feel like I was a client to her. She made me feel like I was a friend. Eventually, I felt like a friend instead of just a client. We were able to bond, go to meetings.... We even did stuff outside of Ohio START. We went shopping together, we've been to meetings together, got coffee together. We even met downtown for the recovery walk, and she gave me a ride home, things like that."

Maddie:

"They helped me to become a better mother to keep my baby, so that they wouldn't take my baby from me. They lead me in the right direction to get on my proper meds, helped me."

Detailed Findings

Previous CPS Experience

Of the 60 interviewed parents, nearly half (45%) stated they had previous experience with CPS before their experience with Ohio START. Most parents (96%) expressed that their experience with Ohio START was more positive than their prior experiences with CPS. The parents frequently highlighted a key distinction: while CPS is often perceived as adversarial, focused mainly on child removal, Ohio START was seen as supportive for both children and parents. Many parents reported that Ohio START provided a more open and honest environment, making them feel that the program was genuinely invested in their well-being and success. When asked to explain their experience with Ohio START in comparison to previous CPS experiences, some of the differences were a stark contrast.

Many parents also emphasized that Ohio START changed their outlook on CPS as they felt encouraged to stay with their children rather than threatened with potential separation. A portion of these respondents even went as far as saying before Ohio START, they felt CPS was “out to get” them, but Ohio START’s honesty and transparency in their experience helped them feel differently.

Another contrast noted in the approach and support provided by Ohio START compared to their previous CPS experiences was that Ohio START workers were seen as advocates who provided necessary resources and support to keep families together, while they perceived their previous experiences as unnecessarily punitive. Parents also perceived their START caseworkers as more committed to helping them avoid court involvement and maintaining custody of their children.

Megan:

“Well, with my regular CPS case, he was a joke. I barely seen him. He came around when he had to. He only called me when he needed me to produce something. He was never there. My START program workers were there every day. I talked to them people; them ladies every day on a regular basis about just everything.... I worked really hard. And if they weren’t there to tell me, ‘You’re doing great,’ I would’ve gave up.”

Brandy:

“Where with the START program, it was different. It was kind of more open and honest feeling.”

Maddie:

“This wasn’t the Ohio START program. This was just Children Services. It did not feel like that lady was trying to help me. She did not refer me to any resources or anything. She was just there to take the kid. That’s why I felt like everybody was out to get me, until I met my social worker through the Ohio START and she was like, no, I’m not here for that. I want you to keep your baby. And she actually showed me that.”

The supportive nature of Ohio START caseworkers, who were perceived as caring and committed rather than just fulfilling a job requirement, played a crucial role in this shift. Parents felt that these workers saw their potential to be good parents despite their struggles, and this recognition helped them feel understood and supported.

Overall, the feedback suggests that Ohio START improved parents' perceptions of CPS. Parents shared that this support was ongoing, with Ohio START offering continuous encouragement and practical assistance, which helped them maintain sobriety, find housing, and ultimately feel more competent as parents.



Figure 1.

Perceptions of Family Peer Mentors

Family Peer Mentors (FPMs) have a positive impact on Ohio START parent participants. The interviews with parents highlight the positive relationships with and perceptions of the FPM with whom they meet regularly and from whom they receive services and support. That supportive and compassionate approach is a key component of the START model (Children and Family Futures, n.d.). Positive perception of the FPMs is an extraordinarily strong theme throughout the interviews with few exceptions. Specifically, out of 60 parent interviews, 55 parents (92%) reported positively about the FPM with whom they worked as they completed START. In one case, the parent unfortunately had three different FPMs but reported positively about all three. Parents interviewed discuss extensive support and services and they do so in reference to the FPM helping them with those needs.



Among the five interviewees who did not indicate a positive experience with the FPM, one didn't discuss the topic, and another's reaction was mixed in that they had a negative experience with their first FPM and a positive experience with the second FPM. Additionally, in another case the parent indicated they did not meet much with the FPM, but their girlfriend did.

Supportive Approach

Jessie:

"She was great. (REDACTED) was wonderful. She became like a really big pillar in my, in my sobriety, we've gone to meetings together, and she kept in touch with me, even when I didn't have an appointment with her, she always made sure to reach out to me, make sure I was okay..... Like she's so deep in her recovery and you know, keeping in touch with me and stuff."

Wraparound Assistance with Tangible Needs

Brandy:

"Yeah, she gave me rides if I had a doctor's appointment or if I had to go pick up diapers or go to the store or whatever the case may be. And she also helped with clothing. Because I had nothing. I didn't find out I was pregnant until I was six months. So that's where this whole issue came in. I had no idea I was pregnant, so I had no clothes, no nothing for her. And she actually put a thing out on Facebook saying that she needed clothing this size through this size. And so she was able to get me clothing and stuff like that."

Able to Relate/ Understood Addiction

Sam:

"Oh, she's awesome. I could relate to her and talk to her and she was just really nice lady. Yeah. She's always been there for me."

Felt like a Friend

Katie:

"Just having a friend like even though like they were there to do their job, like the fact that they were still like a friend through the entire thing, helped."

Dusty:

"She was more like a friend than a peer mentor."

Lastly, the fourth parent indicated they felt whatever they shared with the FPM would be shared with the caseworker, and the fifth parent indicated they had a different approach to their recovery than their FPM, which from their perspective caused challenges.

Within this general theme of positive experience with their FPM, comments can be categorized into a few sub-themes including: a supportive approach, wraparound supports for tangible needs, and being able to relate or be understood because of the shared lived experience with SUD. The wrap-around supports for tangible needs and supports theme is also evident in the parent interviews in relation to FPMs. Many discussed at length that the FPM assisted them with accessing a myriad of services including housing, clothing, furniture, and jobs. This supportive, friendly approach is helpful for parents as they navigate a case with Child Protective Services and are working to recover from substance use disorder or substance abuse that negatively affected their parenting. Parents also felt they could relate to and be understood by the FPM because of the shared lived experience with SUD. Several parents noted specifically that they felt understood or that they could talk about anything with the FPM. It is evident that the parents think of the FPM as more than a staff person helping them. In fact, eight parents used the word “**friend**” to describe the relationship with the FPM.



Melissa:

“She helped me with rides to meetings. She was always there for me when I needed someone to talk to. She always reached out to me. She also would help me go get rides because I don’t have a vehicle. I did get my license through the START program too, which was awesome. They all helped encourage me. When I had to go turn myself in, I was very nervous and I didn’t want to do it, but they told me I needed to and helped me along that way too. Yeah, they helped with the driver’s license. They were just always there, if I needed somebody. It was really nice to have that support. That’s something I never had.”

Sandy:

“Well, the person that I was working with, me and her got really close. She was more a support to me than just a person working with me. The girl I worked with, I don’t know exactly how to explain anything, but the girl I worked with, she just understood me. She pretty much went through everything that I’ve been through with my sobriety and stuff. She just understood me very well.”



High Accessibility to Family Peer Mentor

Over half (35) of the parents noted having high accessibility to their FPM. Although peer mentoring is one of the strongest aspects of Ohio START, high access to peer mentors could cause them to experience burnout and empathy fatigue. The themes emphasized by respondents related to high accessibility of the FPM were: FPMs making themselves constantly available, being persistent with communication, and exceeding expectations when supporting their mentee. To provide ongoing support, many peer mentors provided parents with their personal information.

Many of the parents interviewed also noted that they could contact their peer mentor at any hour whether during the week or on weekends. Parents also report that many of the FPMs shared personal contact information, including cell phone numbers or home addresses. This openness fostered a personal and supportive relationship and provided the sense of a safety net for parents, ensuring they had someone to turn to in moments of need.

When describing the manner of constant communication they had with their FPM, parents highlighted the quick responses they received to messages. Some parents even noted their FPM putting their own life aside to come to their aid.

Hannah:

“Yeah. I have a good relationship with my peer mentor, I can say. I can call him whenever I want to talk. If I just need to talk or if I need to get something done, he’s on it. Or anything like that, he’s just really a good person overall.... [he] takes me to appointments, or talks to me when I need somebody to talk to....he’s always been there for me. That’s about it. It’s a good thing to have in your life, really. I think everybody needs one.”

Stephanie:

“To where I’m out here and even my peer support, she lives right down the road from me, so I have her number and her apartment number, and if I needed to, I could go there and talk to her.”

Lindy:

“She went beyond to help us. Anytime I needed her, she was there, she came. There was not one time she’s like, ‘No, I can’t come.’ She made sure she was there every time for us.”

Matt:

“They’d call me anytime I call and leave them a voicemail. They’d be right there no matter if it was 9:00 or 10:00 at night, they’d call and check up on me make sure I was all right.”

Parents also stressed their appreciation for the proactive check-ins they would receive from FPMs if they had not been in contact for an extended period. These check-ins often facilitated the positive relationship between parents and FPMs.

In addition to the frequent communication, a portion of interviewed parents acknowledged the physical support their FPMs provided that went above and beyond their expectations. This includes providing transportation, helping maintain appointments, and assisting parents in caring for children. The quotes from parents provide examples of such instances.

In a few instances, parents shared that even after they completed Ohio START, their FPM continued to maintain communication. This demonstrates the ongoing effort by the FPM to remain available for their mentee, deepening their bond. It also supports the previously stated notion that parents view FPMs as more than a staff member, and in some cases, even a friend.

The impact the FPMs have on their parents is clear. The high accessibility and unwavering support of the FPMs were instrumental in the success of many parents in Ohio START. These mentors provided not only practical assistance but also emotional and moral support, making a lasting impact on the lives of the parents they helped.



Mallory:

“If I didn’t message her every few days, she would message me just with, ‘Hey, what are you doing?’ Just to check on me.”

Mark:

“Yeah, just the simple fact there was an extra person stopping in to check, trying to keep us on our toes. That honestly helped.”

Timothy:

“...she helped me get an insurance so that I could get into rehab. She took me out to rehab and she was always there.”

Paula:

“Even though I’m graduated from the program, she still keeps in touch with me and makes sure that I don’t need anything. And if I ever do need anything, then I can still come to her for support or just for someone you can talk to.”



Pursuing Substance Use Disorder Field

The interviews also provide insight into changes parents are considering as they recover from SUD and insight into a positive but unintended effect or outcome from the program. Specifically, eight parents voluntarily shared information on plans to go into the recovery field themselves. They stated they'd like to become FPMs themselves or obtain a drug dependency certification, either of which would enable them to work with people experiencing SUD. Consider the following quotes from two parents, Emma and Eileen.

General Employment Assistance

A few parents noted that Ohio START assisted them in finding and maintaining employment. One parent even reported starting a small business due to the support they received from the program.

In addition to direct employment assistance, Ohio START also connected parents with various resources that helped them achieve financial stability. One parent shared how the information and support from the program helped them get out of debt, which in turn enabled them to secure a good job.

Emma:

“Because my goal is, I want to go for peer support also myself, because I think after so many years of use, that it would be the best thing possibly for me.”

Eileen:

“I think I just learned just to believe in myself, that I could really do this. And since starting the program, well, finishing inpatient, starting the program, I started working towards getting my CDCA and I don't think I would have done that without the push.”

Jeremy:

“They even pretty much helped me get the first job I got....They just helped me fill out applications through Indeed and stuff like that because I'm not good on that kind of stuff on my own.”

James:

“I've got more ambition and drive. I started a small business in the last year and a half.”

Zoe:

“...they helped me with resources, that I had to do on my own, but they provided me with the information to resources that eventually I was out of debt....So I was able to get a good job.”

More Present and Affectionate

When analyzing the interview data, another recurring theme emerged: 83 percent of parents made statements that indicate they are more present or affectionate with their child/children since completing Ohio START. Many also include comments indicating increased emotional accessibility.

Previously preoccupied with their substance use disorder, these parents are now intentionally engaging in activities such as going to the park, family events, and apple picking with their children. As highlighted in the quotes, parents have increased the engagement with their children and are prioritizing their needs and desires in activities.

More Activities Together

Jeremy:

“Before we started the START Program, I’d just look at him and tell him, “Go play. Leave me be,” aggravated and stuff like that. Now I let him sit right there beside me. We both play on my phone. We’ll watch TV together. We’ll play with the toys, or fetch with the dog. I’ll take them outside and let him ride his little Jeep that I bought him.”

Rosalie:

“When I was using drugs, I would always just make him go watch TV or just make him go play by himself, but now I’m able to actually sit down and play with him, because they made me take a parenting class. That parenting class helped me a lot.”

Timothy:

“But now I’m not cutting things short as far as when we’re out at family events in order to go home and get high. We’re able to stay and enjoy things that they like more.”

More Affectionate

Kathy:

“I spend a lot more time with my kids and give them a more loving and a happy life.”

More Present

Ellen:

“I’m mentally and physically present [now]. I was always with my kids, but not mentally, because I’d just be so out of it.”

Another sub theme observed in the interviews related to being more present was an increase in emotional support for their children. By being more affectionate and present, they have developed a greater capacity to support their children emotionally. This may indicate that they are now more aware of their children's emotional needs or that they recognize how their substance use disorder previously hindered their ability to provide emotional support. The quotes from parents show both the reflection on their previous behavior and the improvement in their behavior regarding emotional availability.



Further, the interviewed parents are now more mentally present in their children's lives than before. Previously, although they were physically present, their minds were elsewhere, preoccupied with a substance rather than their children. Parent's own depiction of events illustrate how parents were physically there but mentally absent.

Stephanie:

“It was horrible. I was absolutely horrible. I was angry, frustrated, didn’t care about being a mother to my kids. They learned how to grow up way too fast because I wasn’t there. That’s where my daughter has literally been so angry at me. I was intolerable as a mother. I did not care. All I cared about was that next high, and that’s tough to say, but it’s the truth.”

James:

“But like I said, once I got sober, I realized how much I wasn’t engaged with my children, how much I wasn’t alert and aware of their emotions, and how to really enjoy time with them, and things of that nature.”

Cassie:

“Because I’m able to meet my son’s needs before my own and I’m able to give him a lot of love. I’m able to give him the care he needs, not just neglect and ignore him. I can make sure that he is happy and just be there for him before myself.”

Sydney:

“I keep appointments. I keep her up to date on her appointments. I don’t cancel them, and I don’t make excuses why I can’t take her or me to my appointments. Then we actually go to doctor’s appointments now. I will step up. I take her to the dentist or her eye appointments and stuff like that because I was poor about it before.”

By being more affectionate and present with their children, some parents reported that they are now more reliable parents. Previously, due to their substance use disorder, they often failed to follow through on commitments made to their children.

Since completing Ohio START, some parents have reported that they now consistently honor their commitments, demonstrating to their children that they are dependable. The quotes illustrate the changes that these parents have made to be reliable parents.

Prolonged or Saved Life

Another powerful testament to the impact of Ohio START is that, without being asked, ELEVEN parents (18%) reported that participating in the program saved or prolonged their lives. These reflections came in responses to other questions asked by interviewers and were often in the context of recognizing the role Ohio START played in their recovery from substance use disorder. These accounts were often accompanied by expressions of gratitude for the agencies and staff members who assisted them.

One parent, initially skeptical about Child Protective Services (CPS), shared their surprise at the positive influence CPS had on their life, contrasting sharply with the negative reputation CPS typically receives. Another parent described their participation in Ohio START as a “blessing in disguise,” noting that the intervention was crucial for their sobriety. The narratives revealed a recurring theme of unexpected positive outcomes, where the support and guidance from Ohio START were instrumental in helping these parents lead healthier lives, strengthen family bonds, and envision a more hopeful future. The impact of these statements is best conveyed in the parents’ own words.

Brittany:

“It was always empty promises, like, we’ll go to the park later, and later never happened because I’d just be so out of it. And we don’t do that no more, if we say we’re going to go somewhere, we go, and we have a blast going and doing it.”

Jenny:

“And I think it was just a blessing in disguise that this had to happen for me to get sober and want to live because I think if it was gone any longer, I mean, I wouldn’t be here.”

Joni:

“I went through a depression, and they came and took my kids, so I didn’t care about having a house. I didn’t care about having a job. Honestly, I didn’t at the time want to even be alive. So I got my life back because of them. I guess when you do drugs you play Russian roulette, you know what I mean? I never really understood my purpose with life, and I didn’t think I had one. And I didn’t care about my life, whether I was dead or alive. And today, I don’t want to die. I want to be here for my kids. I want to keep being the mother I am for them, and I feel like I have purpose.”

Crystal:

“It saved my life. I would probably be dead. I would probably be dead right now.”

Overall Outlook

Among the changes interviewers observed across many of the interview participants was a shift in their outlook and attitude. Thirty-nine, or 65 percent, of the parents interviewed expressed a positive change in their outlook on life after completing Ohio START. The parents' descriptions of these transformations included themes of personal growth, confidence, self-reliance, and a positive vision for the future.

Many parents highlighted a substantial increase in their self-confidence and independence since graduating from Ohio START. Parents described feeling more empowered and believing more in their abilities to make positive changes in their lives, especially as caregivers and providing for the family financially. Many described a shift from reliance on others to self-sufficiency and belief in their own personal capabilities.

Personal Growth

Chad:

"I feel like it's made me a better a person....I'm clearheaded. I've got the tools to do what's right, know what's right. It's given me an opportunity to have my kids back. It's gave me things I needed to stay successful. So I believe it's made me a better person."

Self-reliance/Independence

Amy:

"They kind of made me more, I guess you could say independent, and I guess stable. Because now I actually make it to my appointments Now I actually get up early, I take my son to daycare, I go to work, I do all the things that a normal adult should do versus before I really didn't have no structure at all...It definitely made my outlook on life a lot better and different. I didn't really have a good outlook on life. I didn't really care about anything. All I wanted to do was just get high and drunk. Now all I want to do is really just build relationships, have time with my son, raise him the correct way."

Confidence

Ashley:

"Yeah. Self-care. I love myself more today. I'm a whole different person."

Positivity about Future

Emma:

"Like I said, the things that I've done in the last year, I can only imagine what I could do in 5 or 10 years. "

Interview participants noted a general improvement in their personal outlook and attitude, transitioning from negativity and hopelessness to positivity and self-assurance. This change is often described as a newfound happiness and a clearer perspective on life.

The quotes included here, highlight the impact of Ohio START in fostering a positive mindset and encouraging a forward-looking attitude.

The program's impact on recovery from substance use disorder and establishing a stable life is a recurring theme. The parents described changes in their behavior and priorities, which included a stronger focus on their family and their desire to build a healthy future together. As discussed in another section of this report, parents described better parenting skills and stronger family bonds after completing the model. Parents expressed pride in their achievements, which included completing parenting classes and gaining certificates. These accomplishments and milestones reinforced their confidence in their abilities as caregivers.

Parents also conveyed a sense of gratitude and appreciation for the support received and the people who helped them. This support has helped participants feel less isolated and more trusting of those around them. This is noteworthy, as some participants had described a distrust of Child Protective Services and other public agencies prior to Ohio START. For many of the parents we spoke with, Ohio START staff were able gain that trust so that parents could begin making positive changes in their lives.

Ohio START has not only helped participants begin recovery from substance use disorder and stabilize their families but has also fostered confidence, personal growth, and a positive outlook on life. This transformation is marked by increased independence, improved relationships, gratitude for support, and a renewed sense of purpose and ambition.

Karli:

"I know who I am, which is crazy that I didn't, but I thought I did, but I didn't. I'm more reliable and accountable for things....More honest. I never used to be a liar, but I would definitely lie by omission, and I don't even do that anymore."

Maggie:

"Yeah, a lot. I'm more motivated than what I was before, just to do what I need to do for my kids, and I'm a different person."

Chloe:

"I'd say it's made me a better person. Because I'm clean and sober and just trying to build a good future for my kids. I'd say I'm definitely a happier person."

Megan:

"Oh, yeah. I used to take crap from everybody, let everybody walk all over me. I don't do that no more because now I know I'm worth something. I have something to give. I'm not just that statistic addict. You know what I mean? That junkie that'll never change."

Conclusion

In this study, we examined 60 interviews from parents who completed Ohio START to explore any changes in parental attitudes and practices after completion of the program. The following findings emerged from this analysis:

1. Parents highly valued the guidance and support of their Family Peer Mentors (FPMs).
2. Parents felt more engaged and present with their children after completing the program.
3. Parents with previous CPS experience perceived the Ohio START approach differently than the general CPS approach.
4. There are additional impacts of Ohio START including helping parents with employment. Some parents also indicated they were going into the SUD treatment field including as peer supporters. Some parents even indicated the program saved or prolonged their life.

The FPMs of Ohio START were regarded very highly by parents, who felt that FPMs better understood their situations than standard CPS caseworkers. Further, a substantial majority of the parents interviewed reported feeling more affectionate and present with their children after completing the program. Parents were provided opportunities to engage with their children through family events and parenting classes. Many stated that after completing the program they felt like more reliable parents, as they are more mentally present rather than preoccupied with substance use. Parents who had previous CPS experience before Ohio START reported feeling more supported during their Ohio START experience compared to their general CPS experience.

These insights from Ohio START graduates tell the story of individual transformations into brighter, more self-assured futures for themselves and their families. These changes are marked by increased independence, improved relationships, and a renewed commitment to the role of parenting. Parents, who were once separated or at risk of being separated from their children, are now home with their children, in recovery from substance use disorder, and navigating the challenges of parenthood and life with skills, confidence, and support systems they did not have previously.

Demographics

The interviewed parents lived in 20 predominantly Appalachian Ohio counties. County data for one interviewee was not available. Fifty-six identified their race as white, two as Black, one as Hispanic and White, and one as Hispanic or Latino/ Native American. Forty-eight indicated that they were female, and 12 indicated they were male. The average age at the time of the interview was 32 (range = 20 to 48). At the time of the interview, all but two interviewees had a child living with them. The average number of children living in the home is two (range = 0 to 5). The average age of children aged 1 and over living with parents was just over 6 years old. Additional demographics are included in the appendix.



Recruitment and Process

The participants were recruited for interviews with a flyer, given to them by their county-level START staff when they graduated from the program. The flyer included details about the interview study and information for contacting the study team. The parent interview focused on parents who completed Ohio START to address questions about parenting in recovery compared to parenting while in active substance use disorder. Sample questions included: “How did substance use affect your parenting?” and “How is your parenting different after completing Ohio START?” Once a parent contacted the study team, an interview was scheduled at a time convenient for the parent. A study team member then called the parent at the set time and interviewed by phone. The interviews took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The parents were incentivized monetarily to participate, which was also information included on the flyer. Upon the interview’s completion, participants could choose to receive a \$75 store gift card via text, email, or standard mail.

Consent to participate in the interview study was obtained either in writing through US mail, or verbally at the beginning of each phone interview. Interviewees were also asked for permission to contact the Child Protective Services (CPS) staff involved with the case to confirm their completion of Ohio START. After the interview, the identified staff were contacted by a study team member to confirm that the interviewed parent had completed Ohio START. Most interviews (33) occurred within two months of Ohio START completion, but one outlier interview occurred almost six months after the participant completed Ohio START.

Parent interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically by using Microsoft Excel. The data analysis employed both an a priori and an emergent coding strategy. Researchers independently coded all interview transcripts. An intercoder reliability check revealed high levels of agreement between coders.

References

- Children and Family Futures. (n.d.). History & values. Retrieved from <https://www.cffutures.org/start-history-and-values/>
- Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO). (n.d.). Frequently asked questions about Ohio START and the services we provide. Retrieved from <https://Ohio START.org/faq/>
- Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO). (2019). Unpublished program document-Ohio START.
- Yoon, S., Ploss, A., Hutzler, M., Webb, R., Hatfield, A., Lee, J. Y., Munshi, A., Radney, A., & McClellan, J. (2024). Parenting attitudes and behaviors among parents involved with the child welfare system and affected by substance use disorders. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 149, 106657