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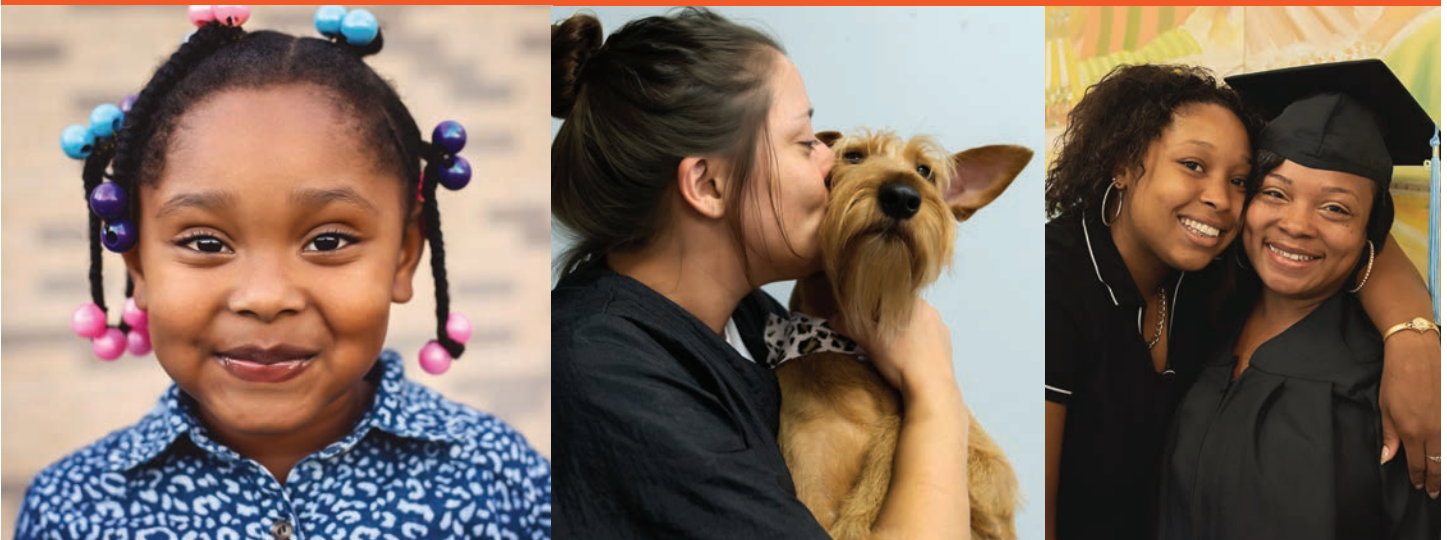
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The Grooming Project

**A program by Empowering the Parent
to Empower the Child**

**Identifying the Common Experience
for Students**



Narrative Report | December 2019

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**Approximately
10 million
U.S. families with
young children
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federally defined
poverty line.**

– The Annie Casey Foundation, 2014



Introduction

In Kansas City, Missouri alone, an estimated 84,000 families with young children are currently experiencing chronic poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

Decades of research have identified that children raised in poverty are less likely to graduate from high school or be consistently employed and are more likely to become adults living in poverty (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2012). Lower educational attainment, limited job prospects, and chronic stress disproportionately effect families living below the poverty line, leading to a multi-generational cycle of poverty that is difficult to break (The Annie Casey Foundation, 2014). There are both federal and state programs designed to support low income families as they navigate challenges like finding childcare or employment. Most of these programs, however, focus on either children or parents experiencing poverty, but typically not both (The Annie Casey Foundation, 2014). Innovative approaches that extend these government-based efforts are needed to comprehensively address the issue of families living in poverty.

A largely unexplored approach for addressing multi-generational poverty is harnessing existing market forces to create long-lasting stability for individuals, their families and their communities. In 2014, Empowering the Parent to Empower the Child (EPEC) was founded as a 501c3 in Kansas City, Missouri with a mission focused on helping families experiencing poverty to become self-reliant through job training. The Grooming Project --launched in 2016-- is a pilot program of EPEC that focuses on providing job training and certification in dog grooming for parents experiencing chronic poverty. Upon completion of the six-month training program, graduates can work as certified dog groomers in one of the area's 200+ pet salons. This job training approach empowers single parents in poverty by equipping them with valuable employment credentials for relatively high-paying positions in a competitive job market. In addition to job training in dog grooming, participants are provided with various life skills classes focused on parenting techniques, financial planning, emotional regulation and job readiness. Therefore, The Grooming Project aims to equip participants with both the in-demand technical skills of dog grooming and the practical, social and emotional skills that will build resilience, reduce stress, and create foundational skills for participants to better respond to their family's needs (The Annie Casey Foundation, 2014). Gaining full-time employment that pays a living wage allows participants to focus on sustainably improving their family's functioning, thereby creating the opportunity to break the cycle of multi-generational poverty.

This report is intended to provide an initial description of the impacts of The Grooming Project's programming on the individuals who participate by documenting a common narrative for their journey before, during, and after the program.



Most participants of The Grooming Project are single mothers receiving government assistance. Many of these individuals also have histories of substance use, engagement in the criminal justice system, and housing insecurity. While these demographics describe many of The Grooming Project's participants, individuals are not excluded from the program if they do not fit within these categories. For example, The Grooming Project serves fathers, married individuals, and those without criminal justice or substance use histories; the only required qualifications for program participants are demonstrated financial need and having children. The effects of The Grooming Project span from the individual outcome to community-wide level. The impacts of the program on the lives of those who have gone through the program to date have been assessed using both quantitative and qualitative data. The findings of this exploratory study are presented in detail below.

Participant History

The Common Participant History

The Grooming Project’s learning model is based on the understanding that participants enter the program with unique lived experiences. However, many have experienced similar challenges with employment, substance use, and involvement with the legal system that are often associated with living in multi-generational poverty. The Grooming Project’s programming provides opportunities for participants to connect with people and animals around them and to engage in a curriculum to improve their psychosocial health, relationships, employability, educational outcomes, and financial stability through an integrated support network.

Education

Educational attainment is one of the strongest predictive factors of success in adulthood in the U.S. [Morgenstern, Hogue, Dasaro, Kuerbis, & Dauber, 2008; Shier, Graham, Fukuda, & Turner, 2015]. Participants enter The Grooming Project with different levels of educational attainment (Table 1).

The Grooming Project’s programming combines an education-based approach that includes vocational training in dog grooming, parenting and budgeting classes, court advocacy, mental health support, and life skills courses, with intensive case management.

The grooming school component of the program consists of 644 classroom hours completed over a period of about 23 weeks. Classes are taught by experienced instructors who are certified groomers. The students also have the opportunity to participate in three internships with local grooming salons. The parenting courses focus on the importance of active parenting, healthy relationships, budget management, and nurturing skills. The soft skills classes focus on social and emotional skills that help students successfully navigate interpersonal relationships in their personal lives and in the workplace. Financial literacy classes expose the students to information about credit, budgeting, banking, and the dangers of predatory lending.

Each student also has access to a volunteer mentor from the community who meets with them biweekly to help with household budgeting and finance questions. During meetings with community mentors, participants develop a working budget and discuss other financial challenges. After the students graduate, they continue working with their mentor for

Table 1. Educational Attainment

	Number of Participants*	Percent of Sample*
Some High School, No Diploma	5	11.9%
GED	8	19%
High School Graduate	16	38.1%
Some Technical School	3	7.1%
Technical School Certificate	3	7.1%
Some College Credit, No Degree	11	26.2%

**The totals are greater than 42 and 100% because some participants selected multiple options.*

another 3-6 months; their mentors provide added support as the students begin to transition off of government benefits. If students would like more intensive financial coaching after working with their mentors, they are referred to Women's Employment Network or other financial coaching non-profit resources in the community.

Overall, the core training program takes place over an average period of six months. Once students graduate from the initial training program, they enter the 18-month Bridge Program, where The Grooming Project's staff and volunteers continue to provide job coaching, case management, court advocacy, budgeting, emergency assistance, and other supportive services as graduates adapt to their new jobs and navigate the challenges associated with transitioning off government benefits.

Involvement in Criminal Justice System

Criminal history can act as a major barrier to employment, specifically employment in higher paying jobs (Chintakrindi, Porter, Kim, & Gupta, 2015). Prior to participating in the program, some graduates reported involvement with the criminal justice system (Table 2). One participant shared that before The Grooming Project, "I wasn't going anywhere in life. I couldn't get a job because I'm a felon, and so a lot of people look down on me for that and don't give me a chance." The stigma of being involved with the justice system coupled with the lack of living-wage trades that are available to felons, contributes to the challenge of obtaining employment experienced by program participants with felony convictions.

Table 2. History of Involvement in the Criminal Justice System

	Number of Participants	Total Percent of Sample
Do you have any active warrants?		
No	37	88.1%
Not sure	2	4.8%
Yes	3	7.1%
Have you ever been convicted of a felony?		
No	34	81.0%
Pending	1	2.3%
Yes	7	16.7%

Convicted felons face a variety of challenges as they attempt to avoid reoffence and reenter the workforce. Frounfelker, Glover, Teachout, Wilkniss, and Whitley (2010) found that participants with criminal justice involvement take longer to access employment services; although, there was no difference in the rate at which services were ultimately used between the groups. Findings suggest that this delay in use of services may be caused by prohibitive guidelines for ex-offenders. Additionally, this population is not as quickly referred to supported employment by practitioners.

Lageson and Uggen (2013) discuss why employment is important in reducing the likelihood an individual will engage in criminal activity. In particular, income likely provides a key protective factor by reducing an individual's potential motivation to participate in criminal activity. Holding regular employment may also mean that the person is subject to increased social controls and will, therefore, be less likely to participate in criminal activity. Regular employment may also simply reduce the time available to participate in criminal activity.

Further, crime appears less appealing if the ability to climb economically and socially are more accessible (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960).

Lageson and Uggen (2013) also found that adults separating themselves from crime is dependent on quality of work and the social bonds created in the workplace. Previous research indicates that there is a significant relationship between the intensity of work (e.g., hours worked per week), the quality of work (e.g., economically rewarding, personally satisfying in that it provides comfort, challenges, rewards, and relationships), and a decreased likelihood to engage in criminal activity (Bachman, Staff, O'Malley, Schulenberg, & Freedman-Doan, 2011; Uggen, 1999).



Shover (1996) notes that the factors within job quality that would protect an individual against criminal activity include “a decent income” and the space to use intelligence and creativity. Additionally, as people become integrated into the social network of a job, they begin to adopt prosocial behaviors as these relationships become a supportive resource during their process of reintegration and desistance (Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, 2004).

In addition to technical training, which ultimately provides access to dog grooming jobs, The Grooming Project addresses many of the issues identified as barriers for convicted felons by providing an economically rewarding, challenging and supportive environment for participants. While participating in the program, students can connect with other individuals in their cohort, receive social support from staff, engage with community members who utilize their grooming services, and form bonds with the dogs that they groom. These opportunities, coupled with increasing participant employability and job readiness, may serve as an additional protective factor against participants’ future involvement in the criminal justice system.

The Grooming Project has developed an outreach model focused on recruiting individuals experiencing the challenges associated with being ex-felons. Through ongoing recruitment presentations by EPEC at community organizations, potential students learn about the job training opportunity and stabilization program provided by the program. In order to reach justice system-involved parents who could benefit from participation in the program, The Grooming Project staff incorporates transitional living facilities and other “second-chance” programs into their recruitment process.

Substance Use

Substance use adds additional complexity to the lives of The Grooming Project’s participants, affecting employability, mental health, and family functioning. Some of the participants discussed their struggles with substance use, sharing that they “[were] on drugs badly” or “had problems with addiction issues,” prior to the program (Table 3).

There are a number of factors that inform substance use. Some participants disclosed that they had grown up around parents or family members who struggled with substance use. One participant shared, “I got taken away as a baby – for

Table 3. Were you in recovery from drug and/or alcohol use when enrolled in The Grooming Project?

	Number of Participants	Percent of Sample
Yes	10	23.8%
No	31	73.8%
Prefer not to answer	1	2.4%

drugs – and got placed with my grandparents and now I feel like I’m falling in my parents’ footsteps, and I don’t like that.” McLaughlin, Campbell, and McColgan (2016) identified that parent or sibling substance misuse was a factor informing the likelihood for adolescent substance use. Further, other studies indicate that authoritative parenting styles, positive attachments, and parental monitoring can be protective factors against substance use (Calafat, Garcia, Juan, Becona, & Fernandez-Hermida, 2014; Fallu et al., 2010; van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, Dekovic, & Vermulst, 2006).

Participants who mentioned their struggle with substance use also spoke about their own parenting, and how their substance use affected their relationship with their children and family. One participant highlighted, “most of [my daughter’s] life ... I was on drugs and so ... she just kinda grew bitter with me. But my youngest one, she’s young enough still to where she wants to have a relationship with me. I think my oldest one does too, I just think she has a different way of showing it.”

Similar to physical health challenges, psychiatric illness, poor academic or job skills, and lack of transportation, substance abuse can be a barrier for low-income mothers’ ability to find and keep work (Metsch & Pollack, 2005). Addressing substance use can have a positive impact on individuals’ income and employment prospects. Chintakrindi, Porter, Kim and Gupta (2015) found that both substance use and criminal history negatively affected participants’ employment status and earning outcomes. However, participants with a history of substance use that had then been enrolled in a treatment program were more likely to be employed than those not enrolled in treatment (Chintakrindi et al., 2015). Furthermore, Sung and Chu (2011) found that the number of employed participants a year following substance use treatment was double the number observed within the first few months of substance use treatment.

It is important to note that those who have substance use disorder also may struggle with many other personal barriers to employment. Morgenstern et al. (2008) found that readiness to work is only weakly related to readiness to abstain from substance use. Instead, employability was highly mediated by other factors such as involvement in the legal system and educational attainment (Morgenstern et al., 2008). Metsch and Pollack (2005) found that having access to support programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), alone were not enough to help mothers with substance use disorders obtain employment. Practical factors, like work experience and programs providing childcare were found to be key factors in predicting transitions from welfare to work (Schmidt, Zabkiewicz, Jacobs, & Wiley, 2007).

At the time of this study, some of The Grooming Project’s participants reported that they were currently in recovery from drug and/or alcohol use (Table 4).

Table 4. Are you currently in recovery from drug and/or alcohol use?

	Number of Participants	Percent of Sample
No	32	76.2%
Yes	10	23.8%

Participants shared that The Grooming Project provided structure to their life that supported them in maintaining their sobriety, which then improved their employability and relationships with their family. One participant shared how her path to sobriety changed how her children viewed her. She said, “I was a drug addict, really bad. Then right before I entered the program, I got clean and sober and I stayed clean and sober here, so [my children] were beyond proud and comfortable with me.” Another participant shared that in the future, they hope to use their experiences with The Grooming Project to start a dog training program to help people during recovery from substance use.

Experience with Dogs

Working with dogs is a key component of The Grooming Project, but participants enter the program with different levels of experience and comfort with dogs (Table 5). While many participants previously had positive experiences with dogs, usually growing up with one in the household, a few participants mentioned feeling “nervous” or “afraid” of dogs when starting the program.

Table 5. What is your previous experience with dogs?

	Number of Participants*	Percent of sample*
Grew up with dogs as pets	37	83.3%
Little experience with dogs	1	2.4%
Never had dogs as pets, but was around them	4	9.5%
Had a fear of dogs and would avoid them	2	4.8%
Other	3	7.1%

* The totals are greater than 42 and 100% because some participants selected multiple options.

Stability and Security

Vocational Skills and Stable Employment

A main objective of The Grooming Project is to increase the rate of stable employment for its participants. Employment instability is one of the most common pre-program lived experiences for its participants. Program graduates reported, “not really having a job,” “working temp jobs that would pay \$25 to \$50 a day,” or finding it “rough to hold a job [because of] social anxiety” prior to The Grooming Project.

Early research indicates that using the “welfare to work” model to inform vocational training programming has been a cost-effective use of taxpayer resources (Department of Labor [DOL], 1994).

Vocational training programs can produce long-term positive effects for individuals who have previously depended on government assistance, particularly when work opportunities provided by the program are highly structured and paid.

Ragazzi and Sella (2013) conducted a study in Italy with a diverse set of individuals who experienced an array of barriers to engaging in the workforce. These individuals included: school-aged individuals, immigrants, and adults with a lower education level. Ragazzi and Sella (2013) identified that vocational training facilitates skill creation and builds human capital, which ultimately facilitates social inclusion - a critical factor for success in the workforce.

By the time students have completed 644 hours of vocational training in dog grooming at The Grooming Project, they have not only learned a trade, but have also developed key interpersonal skills that contribute to sustained employment. Upon completion of the program, all twelve participants interviewed shared that they had immediately acquired a part-time or full-time grooming job in the community (Table 6). One participant was recently promoted to a manager position at Petco’s grooming salon and discussed her professional goals as a manager: “I want to be able to test myself and bring their

numbers up, which I have been doing since I’ve been here. We are number five in the district now.” Having this job stability and even availability for mobility within an organization, for one participant, is “the first time [they have] had a steady job [their] whole life.”

Table 6. Current Employment Status

Current Employment Status	Graduated 0-12 Months Ago	Graduated 1+ Year Ago	Percent of sample
Employed full time as a groomer	5 (16.1%)	11 (35.5%)	51.6%
Employed part-time as a groomer	2 (6.5%)	2 (6.5%)	12.9%
Employed part-time as a groomer and has a second job not in grooming industry	1 (3.2%)	0 (0.0%)	3.2%
Employed, but not in grooming industry	2 (6.5%)	3 (9.7%)	16.1%
Not employed	2 (6.5%)	3 (9.7%)	16.1%

Graduates shared that The Grooming Project staff helped them secure a job before they graduated, through job referrals and assisting with resumes. To ensure participants obtain stable employment after graduation, The Grooming Project works to proactively address employment barriers, like childcare, housing, transportation, and mental health, while also providing a variety of educational resources to support participants in integrating the soft skills curriculum with the technical courses in dog grooming. One participant shared how the staff in particular, “...gave us a lot of resources as far as... our everyday life outside of the school... different places we can go if we didn’t have anywhere to go... or different resources for... clothes, food, stuff like that.”

Graduates discussed the overwhelmingly positive impact The Grooming Project had in the stability of their employment after the program. Graduates mentioned finding their passion in dog grooming. A participant said, “I’m doing something I actually love and... I want... to learn a lot more.”

One person noted, “I just know that if it wasn’t for this program I wouldn’t be where I [am] today. I wouldn’t be in a steady job.”

After graduating from the program, many participants are still working at the same job they obtained upon graduation, while some have gone on to find a job that is a better fit (Table 7). The reasons listed in the survey for leaving a salon included: not having enough clients, childcare issues, interpersonal issues with other staff, interpersonal issues with clients, medical issues, finding better opportunities, finding a better paying position, and problems with the salon’s culture. Oftentimes, students work in one or two salons before finding a grooming salon that is the right fit.

When asked about their long-term career goals, many interviewees expressed interest in opening their own grooming salon in the future. One graduate stated, “I want to own my own business and open up my own doggie salon. I’ll be daydreaming about that... thinking about what life will be like five to ten years down the line. I want to open my own grooming business [and be] my own manager, you know my own CEO.” Interviewees also shared a desire to support local grooming businesses while working towards opening their own. When talking about their future grooming salons, several participants planned on incorporating their family and loved ones into the venture to support their future. A graduate stated, “That’s my dream, to be able to have something for my mom and my sister to come work at.”

Table 7. Employment After Graduation

	Graduated 0-12 Months Ago	Graduated 1+ Year Ago	Percent of sample
Number of Salons Worked at Since Graduating from The Grooming Project			
No Salons	1 (3.2%)	0 (0.0%)	3.2%
1 Salon	5 (16.1%)	7 (22.6%)	38.7%
2 Salons	3 (9.7%)	6 (19.4%)	29.0%
3 Salons	2 (6.5%)	5 (16.1%)	22.6%
4 Salons	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.2%)	3.2%
N/A	1 (3.2%)	0 (0.0%)	3.2%

If Currently Grooming, How Long Have You Been Grooming For?

Not currently grooming	4 (12.9%)	5 (16.1%)	29.0%
Less than 1 month	3 (9.7%)	0 (0.0%)	9.7%
1-3 months	3 (9.7%)	1 (3.2%)	12.9%
4-6 months	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.2%)	3.2%
7-9 months	1 (3.2%)	2 (6.5%)	9.7%
10-12 months	1 (3.2%)	3 (9.7%)	12.9%
Over 1 year	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0.0%
1-2 years	0 (0.0%)	5 (16.1%)	16.1%
Over 2 years	0 (0.0%)	2 (6.5%)	6.5%

Financial Stability

Stress resulting from financial instability can cause depression, anxiety and substance use, all of which can compromise family functioning (The Annie Casey Foundation, 2014).

In contrast, financial security resulting from stable employment is linked to multiple protective factors that can improve the overall quality of life for participants and their families. Therefore, the primary goal of The Grooming Project is to provide a pathway for participants to obtain stable employment. For many participants, financial instability prior to the program is a common theme (Table 8). One person shared, “whatever cash money I got it was from working. But it was never enough.”

During their time in the program, many participants worked part-time jobs in order to cover their basic costs of living. After their first 30 days in the program, students can receive tips from the grooming services they perform. To make ends meet during their time in the program, it is important for students to have supports in place, like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), childcare subsidies, and housing assistance. Once they graduate and gain full-time employment, The Grooming Project staff help graduates navigate off these government assistance programs through budgeting, emergency assistance, and other supportive services and referrals.

Many participants shared a new level of financial stability once they graduate from the program (Table 8). One graduate shared that she is now, “paying rent and...able to buy food and stuff that my daughter needs and some things that she wants,” in addition to paying bills to “keep the lights on.” Multiple participants also mentioned new goals to pay off debt and save money now that they are experiencing increased financial stability. One participant talked about paying off car loans,

and another shared that she was saving up to get her daughter braces. Another shared, “It is so much better now...my bills are paid...and I don’t have a lot of debt. I am able to come home to my kids and spend more time with my kids.”

With the feeling of financial stability came a newfound financial independence for some participants: “After The Grooming Project ... I’m not living paycheck to paycheck and I’m not worrying about where our next meal is coming from or how to pay this bill and that bill. I feel like I can lean on my job a lot more and I feel like I don’t need to ask for anything anymore.”

Table 8. Income After Enrolling in The Grooming Project

Annual Income	Income 0-12 Months After Graduation	Income 1+ years After Graduation
\$0-\$6000	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
\$6001-\$12,000	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
\$12,001-18,000	1 (8.3%)	0 (0.0%)
\$18,001-\$24,000	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
\$24,001-\$30,000	0 (0.0%)	1(8.3%)
\$30,001-\$36,000	3 (24.9%)	1 (8.3%)
\$36,001-\$42,000	1 (8.3%)	0 (0.0%)
\$42,0001-\$48,000	0 (0.0%)	3 (25.0%)
N/A	0 (0.0%)	2 (16.7%)

Housing Security

Having a stable, safe, and clean place to live was a long-term goal stated by many participants at The Grooming Project. Housing stability is recognized by the program’s staff as a protective factor for participants that is linked with financial stability and other factors such as substance use and family functioning. Housing insecurity can take many forms, including moving frequently, living in shelters or vehicles, or living completely without shelter. The majority of participants interviewed and surveyed described unstable or insecure living situations prior to their enrollment in The Grooming Project (Table 9).

Table 9. Housing Status Before and After The Grooming Project

Housing Type	Housing Before Enrollment	Percent of Sample (Before)	Housing During Enrollment	Housing 0-12 Months After Graduation	Housing 1+ Years After Graduation	Percent of Sample (After)
Homeless	4	9.5%	1	0	0	2.4%
Transitional housing	1	2.4%	0	0	0	0.0%
Temporary/ Emergency Housing	7	16.7%	2	0	0	4.8%
Subsidized housing	10	23.8%	5	7	3	35.7%
Renting, no subsidy	6	14.3%	1	2	8	26.2%
Staying with friends/family	13	31.0%	1	3	7	26.2%
Own a home	1	2.4%	1	0	1	4.8%

Some participants said that they were experiencing homelessness prior to their enrollment in the program, while others were “living place to place” or in transitional housing. One participant discussed how being homeless affected her ability to provide for her daughter:

“Before The Grooming Project I was homeless so I didn’t have stability, really. I worked temp jobs and they weren’t really doing much for me. I made enough to just feed my daughter and provide for her.”

Another participant talked about living in transitional housing before the program, “I was in a sober living house and my kids were staying with my mom when I was in school. And now I have a house... me and my daughters just got a house a couple weeks ago.”

Low-income families, like those participating in The Grooming Project, are much more likely to move homes than other families. These individuals can experience housing instability for many reasons, including the formation and dissolution of households (i.e., moving in with a partner and their family, then moving out again), the inability to afford the cost of living, loss of employment, lack of a social support system and safety net, and the desire to move to a safer neighborhood. Shier et al. (2015) found that protective factors against housing stability included living in larger cities, increased income, increased education levels, and a stable relationship status. Increases in population can lead to rising costs of living, which contributes to greater rates of housing instability for low income individuals (Sturtevant, 2014). Furthermore, individuals with substance use disorder are more likely to experience housing insecurity. Such insecurity in housing can lead to social ramifications, such as higher crime and addiction rates, and psychological effects, such as decreased self-esteem and self-worth (Ehrenreich, 2001; Iverson & Armstrong, 2006; Shier et al., 2015).

Housing insecurity not only affects the participants of The Grooming Project, but their children as well. Frequent mobility and housing insecurity have been found to impact mental health and behavioral outcomes in youth (Cohen & Wardrip, 2011). For example, housing insecurity is correlated with children exhibiting behavioral problems and adolescent risk-taking behaviors.



A study of sixth graders in Chicago showed that housing insecurity led to an educational gap of a whole year between the kids who had moved four or more times as opposed to the kids who had not moved around (Cohen & Wardrip, 2011).

The Grooming Project participants reported a period of transition in their living situations post-graduation, followed by a marked improvement in the quality and stability of their housing. A majority of the program's graduates (74.4%) have moved no more than one time since enrolling in the program (Table 10).

Table 10. Number of Times Moved Since Enrolling

Number of Moves	Currently Enrolled	0-12 Months After Graduation	1+ Years After Graduation	Percent of Sample
0	9 (21.4%)	9 (21.4%)	3 (7.1%)	50.0%
1	1 (2.4%)	2 (4.8%)	8 (19.0%)	26.2%
2	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (11.9%)	14.3%
3	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (7.1%)	7.1%
4	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	2.4%

As participants completed The Grooming Project and entered the workforce, they were able to look for housing options to better meet their family's needs within their budget restrictions. One participant who had graduated about seven months earlier noted, "we're in a transitional housing program now... so we have permanent housing that is stable, but in 6 months, I want to be self-sufficient completely." Another participant who had graduated a year earlier shared her experience following graduation: "I got out of transitional living and I moved to an apartment. It wasn't right. Then I moved to a house. It wasn't right. And just 3 days ago I moved to another apartment with furniture. I have a bathtub. I pay my own rent for something I feel comfortable in. Like, I feel fabulous right now. It feels great to get in somewhere I feel comfortable."

Many participants expressed that finding housing suitable for their children was a main priority: "My son has his own room. My daughter has her own room... There's a big backyard fence area where they can run around." Making sure that their children's education was not negatively impacted by a move was also a focus for some participants. One individual recalled, "I was trying to find a house that was already in [the area] so my kids didn't have to move out of the school district."

Finding housing in safe neighborhoods was reported as a struggle for some participants. Half of the participants interviewed talked about living in unsafe communities and how these environments affect their children. Examples shared include one participant who said, "A lot of shootings are happening. Someone was shot and killed right in front of our apartment... I'm really trying to move out somewhere closer to this area ... where I can let [my son] be a kid, because right now he can't really be a kid where we're at." The other half of participants were happy with where they lived because they said they felt their community was a safe place to raise their children, "You see the kids getting on the bus. You see the bus coming and going. You see the families coming in the front yard and walking their dog. You know, everyone's on the same page at the end of the day."

Reliable Transportation

Reliable transportation has been shown to be an important factor influencing employability (Cervero, Sandoval, & Landis, 2002). Some of the program participants lack access to reliable transportation and other resources like a driver's license and auto insurance (Table 11). A study by Cervero, Sandoval, and Landis (2002) showed that an individual who was unemployed and receiving government assistance, but owned a car, was more likely to secure employment than those who did not own

a car. Further, private transportation was found to be more important than access to public transportation for individuals living in urban environments who were employed full-time and achieving self-sufficiency (Cervero, Sandoval, & Landis, 2002). However, access to walk-and-ride public transportation was also found to be a statistically significant predictor of an individual's ability to end their enrollment in government assistance (Cervero, Sandoval, & Landis, 2002). In this way, reliable transportation is a key factor in sustainable employment.

The Grooming Project offers a \$125 weekly travel stipend to participants to reduce the barrier of lack of access to transportation. The stipend is intended to encourage participant attendance. Preliminary data in Table 11 shows an increase in participants' possession of a car, car insurance, and a valid driver's license increases a year after graduation from The Grooming Project. For many participants, reliable transportation was tied to their employment and financial status. One participant shared how she was able to buy her own car after completing The Grooming Project, "When you barely make any money you can barely survive right? But now I'm making decent money, have my own car, my own house, pay my own bills. When you can pay your car payment and rent with the same check, that is an amazing feeling."

Table 11. Participant Transportation

	Currently Enrolled*	0-12 Months After Graduation*	1+ Years After Graduation*	Percent of Sample*
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Primary Form of Transportation*

Friends or family provide rides	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.8%)	1 (2.4%)	7.1%
Other	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	2.4%
Have access to friend's/ family's car	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	4.8%
Have own car	8 (19.0%)	8 (19.0%)	15 (35.7%)	73.8%
Ride the bus	2 (4.8%)	2 (4.8%)	1 (2.4%)	11.9%
Walk	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	2 (4.8%)	7.1%

Do you have a valid Driver's License?

No	2 (4.8%)	5 (11.9%)	2 (4.8%)	21.4%
Yes	9 (21.4%)	7 (16.7%)	17 (40.5%)	78.6%

Do you have a registered car with current tags?

Don't have a car	3 (7.1%)	2 (4.8%)	3 (7.1%)	18.6%
No	1 (2.4%)	3 (7.1%)	0 (0.0%)	9.3%
Yes	7 (16.7%)	7 (16.7%)	6 (14.3%)	72.1%

Do you have insurance for your vehicle?

Don't have a car	3 (7.1%)	2 (4.8%)	3 (7.1%)	19.0%
No	1 (2.4%)	5 (11.9%)	1 (2.4%)	16.7%
Yes	7 (16.7%)	5 (11.9%)	15 (35.7%)	64.3%

* The totals are greater than 42 and 100% because some participants selected multiple options.

Use of Government Assistance

Utilizing government assistance programs was identified by the program graduates as the primary form of financial support they received before the program (Table 12). If students are not receiving benefits for which they are eligible, The Grooming Project staff typically help participants navigate government assistance enrollment. These public assistance programs include: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program; Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); Medicare; Medicaid; Section 8 housing subsidies; and other cash benefits or childcare subsidies to cover childcare costs.

Table 12. Use of Government Assistance Programs Before, During, and After The Grooming Project

Gov't Assistance	Before Enrollment (# of individuals)*	Percent of Sample (Before)*	During Enrollment	0-12 Months After Graduation	1+ Years After Graduation	Percent of Sample (After)
None	7	16.7%	3	1	9	31.0%
SNAP	33	78.6%	7	10	8	59.5%
Social Security Disability	3	7.1%	1	1	1	7.1%
WIC	6	14.3%	1	2	1	9.5%
TANF	5	11.9%	1	1	0	4.8%
Childcare Subsidy	13	31.0%	3	5	3	26.2%
Housing Subsidy	13	31.0%	4	5	2	26.2%
Utility Assistance	7	16.7%	2	1	0	7.1%

* The totals are greater than 42 and 100% because some participants selected multiple options.

Following the program, most participants had decreased the number of government assistance programs they were enrolled in, with 31.0% no longer utilizing any form of public aid or subsidies. However, when participants began to obtain a higher income after finishing their time at The Grooming Project, many participants reported feeling “overwhelmed,” “worried,” or “nervous” about the possibility of losing their eligibility for some of these assistance programs. One participant remembered wondering “if [I] was going to make enough to support [me and my son].”

The prospective loss of benefits due to higher and more stable financial status, often referred to as the benefits cliff effect, has been shown to function as a barrier to employment and financial security.

A recent study examined women's use of government assistance, particularly childcare subsidies, and found that significant percentages of women had declined promotions, opportunities for extra hours, and even job offers in order to prevent the loss of their childcare subsidies (Roll & East, 2014).



Some participants in The Grooming Project felt that ending enrollment in government assistance was both a worrisome and positive experience. A participant recounted the different thoughts and emotions that came up for her when ending her enrollment: “I was dependent on [food stamps]. I knew it was coming and when I didn’t receive it anymore, it was heartbreaking... It was just like, ‘Oh wow, what am I going to do now?’ You know, I can’t depend on it anymore... It felt good at the same time... but I just had that space where I was like I can’t depend on this anymore.” Other participants described ending their enrollment as “self-empowering,” stating: “I don’t need the government to support me” and “I was proud of myself” when the time came to end their enrollment in benefits.

Throughout their programming, The Grooming Project works to build resilience and healthy financial habits with participants, equipping them with the tools and connections to deal with the reality of the benefits cliff that will inevitably come with a living-wage job in the grooming industry.

Health Insurance

Access to health care is an important aspect of a family’s financial and overall health. Ahmed, Lemkau, Nealeigh, and Mann (2001) found that 74% of low-income urban individuals reported one or more barriers to health care. These barriers included lack of knowledge about free or reduced-cost health care, inability to pay anticipated cost, inability to find transportation to healthcare providers, and difficulty accessing child-care while seeking medical attention. In the absence of access to health care, many individuals do not seek medical help, resulting in higher morbidity and mortality rates in populations living in poverty (Friedman, 1994). In contrast, greater access to health care is related to better overall health, more use of outpatient services, and lower hospitalization rates (Bindman, Grumbach, & Osmond, 1995).

The most common barrier to health care cited throughout the scientific literature is lack of health insurance (Ahmed et al., 2001; Hafner-Eaton, 1993; Weissman, Stern, Fielding, & Epstein, 1991). While most of The Grooming Project participants were on state-funded health insurance prior to participating in the program, more individuals are on employer provided insurance and fewer are utilizing state-provided health insurance following the program (Table 13).

Table 13. Health Insurance Before and After The Grooming Project

	Insurance Before Enrollment	Percent of Sample (Before)	Insurance During Enrollment	Insurance 0-12 Months After Graduation	Insurance 1+ Years After Graduation	Percent of Sample (After)
None	17	40.5%	5	7	8	47.6%
Yes, employer provided	1	2.4%	0	1	4	11.9%
Yes, private insurance	1	2.4%	2	0	0	4.8%
Yes, state health insurance	23	54.8%	4	4	7	35.7%

Participants shared that the increase in stability provided by having access to healthcare through their employer not only impacted their life but their child's life as well. One graduate noted, "It definitely gave my life and her life stability. I can put groceries in my fridge now without having to worry about... anything. I can pay all my bills on time. I pay my bills monthly without getting behind. No back-pay. I've been able to help my mom. I've been getting caught up on some of my debt."

An overwhelming majority (90.7%) of graduates from The Grooming Project now have health insurance for their children (Table 14). However, there is also an overall increase in participants without any form of health insurance after enrollment in The Grooming Project program. This decrease in healthcare enrollment is likely associated with the loss of Medicaid upon stable employment. Many grooming salons do not offer employer-sponsored benefits and private insurance is unaffordable for recent graduates. Fortunately, graduates' children remain eligible for Missouri's Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), a low-cost option (Table 14).

Table 14. Do you currently have health insurance that covers your children?

	Currently Enrolled	Graduated 0-12 Months Ago	Graduated 1+ Years Ago	Percent of sample*
N/A	1 (2.4%)	2 (4.8%)	1 (2.4%)	9.5%
No	3 (7.1%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	9.5%
Yes, employer sponsored insurance	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.4%)	4.8%
Yes, state health insurance	7 (16.7%)	10 (23.8%)	17 (40.5%)	81.0%
Yes, private health insurance	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.4%)	47.6%

* The totals are greater than 100% because some participants selected multiple options.

Personal Development

Sense of Self-Worth and Self-Efficacy

In addition to an increase in job-related skills that can support program graduates in obtaining stable employment, vocational training can support improvement in psychosocial outcomes. Many of The Grooming Project graduates stated that prior to the program, they had very little confidence in the decisions that they were making or were unhappy in their current jobs. One person shared, "I didn't have any goals and... if I would even think that I wanted a goal... I didn't have confidence to reach them. Didn't have a... way to prioritize them in my head." Another participant shared that before The Grooming Project, "I wasn't satisfied with myself," and "I would be ready to fight people. I was self-conscious about what other people thought."

The program participants all expressed internal factors that pushed them to become involved in The Grooming Project, including joining to better support their child, having a desire to work with animals, wanting to try something different with their life and career, and knowing that their future would be good if they completed the program.

One participant reported, "I knew what my future would hold for me as long as I did what I had to do here. Wake up. Put the hours in. Learn."

Cook and Farrington (2016) found that the Washington State Corrections Center for Women's vocational program in dog training resulted in an increase in self-esteem and self-efficacy with many of the women reporting that they feel empowered, proud, and that they are able to achieve the goals that they set for themselves. These women demonstrated an increase

in emotional intelligence and coping skills, as well as an ability to cope with anger, frustration, and loss when their dog is adopted or leaves the program (Cook and Farrington, 2016). The graduates of The Grooming Project demonstrate similar outcomes; for example, an increase in emotional intelligence and regulation towards others, along with an increase in perception of self-control and worth.

Several graduates struggled with self-doubt during the program, including thoughts like: “I did not believe I was going to make it through,” or “I wasn’t dependable enough.” Mental health and personal development challenges were also barriers to overcome. “Anxiousness” was a feeling shared by multiple participants to describe their emotional state before and during the program. One student noted that with the “mental stuff that was going on with me - emotional stuff - I wasn’t quite ready or prepared.”

How participants viewed themselves was impacted by their time at The Grooming Project. This manifested in many forms, including improved patience, self-worth, self-control, confidence, emotion regulation, feeling brave, feeling accomplished, feeling like a success, and feeling like they now possessed the skills to help others and continue growing.

One graduate shared, “I have a purpose again... and self-worth.” Another participant was proud that she “learned how to handle difficult situations,” saying, “I didn’t lose faith in myself and drop out.”

A previous study of The Grooming Project found that participants experienced an increase in positive work attitudes, behaviors, and self-esteem (Williams, 2017). The most common theme expressed by participants in the present study was a sense of pride and confidence in completing the program. Participants also reported an increase in confidence in being able to speak up for themselves in their interpersonal interactions and a belief in their ability to cope with life stressors and challenging situations.



Graduates of The Grooming Project discussed developing a willingness to handle the hard work of the program and find the motivation to take the steps necessary for their graduation. Many participants stated that the program pushed them to be more focused. One student noted, “...the challenge was definitely... waking up every morning and makin[g] sure I keep my focus to be able to succeed here because I can either keep going and get my certificate or I can just slack off and potentially lose my, you know, chance of getting a certificate.”

Another participant shared, “...when I came [to The Grooming Project], I had high anxiety, I was angered, I would snap real quick, I would cry I would not want to be here, and I just worked through that. I mean that’s part of the program; they help you work through those emotions.”

The Grooming Project graduates expressed that, despite the challenging aspects of the program that sometimes made them doubt their ability to graduate, the impact that the program had on their lives was worth the challenge. One graduate provided some advice for future participants: "Stick with it. Like I said it's challenging and it's tough, but if you set your mind to it, you can do it."



Participants all reported an increased sense of control over their own lives, "I have control over my life... I make my choices now and I'm not a victim." Many of the same participants also talked about coming to a deeper understanding of where their control ended. One participant explained how they learned to navigate anxiety stemming from environments they could not control, "I just had to learn how to let go because ... I can't control that situation."

After graduating from The Grooming Project, students expressed a newfound hope for the future. When talking about their satisfaction in life now one person mentioned, "I get, some kind of satisfaction that's indescribable." Participants found that they were able to recognize the positive impacts gained from the program and sustain these positive impacts and actions after graduation. When asked what they were most proud of, many participants said 'graduation:' "I was here on time every day, doing what I was supposed to be doing," and "I stuck to it and actually graduated." A majority of participants also shared that they were proud of themselves. One participant described how this sense of accomplishment affected those around her, "I'm being positive and I'm affecting other people's lives in a positive way."

Being trusted as a provider by their children was also another prominent source of pride for participants, "I came a long way. I feel like I'm finally someone [my daughter] can look up to."

Self-Regulation

Positive self-image, sense of efficacy, perceived control, and emotional stability are all positive predictors of persistence in a job search, despite the number of rejections participants faced (Wanberg, Glomb, Song & Sorenson, 2005). In addition to self-efficacy, self-regulation was a skill that many participants spoke about improving upon during their time at The Grooming Project. Self-regulation involves conscious processes (e.g., low-level cognitive control, high-level executive functioning), as well as more intrinsic, automatic responses that modulate emotion, cognition, and behavior to achieve a goal (Nigg, 2017). Some participants spoke about how self-regulation helped them find and keep their employment, "...back then I was just immature before I started, and now, handling everything, I'm a boss [at my job] now and I feel like an adult. I can see some changes."

Almost all graduates mentioned a change in their ability to self-regulate and an improved perception about self and life during the course of the program. One participant shared how, "[The program] helped me with my anger management and it helped me to think before I act. It helped me tackle a lot of things and focus on staying off drugs... I wake up every morning and I think about what I need." Graduates also described how their interpersonal skills were positively impacted during and after their time in the program. One participant shared, "It changed how I talked and acted, and it helped me a lot to... interact with other people." Other participants reported: "I think before I react," and if a situation is frustrating, "I walk away and just relax."

Other participants talked about how they had seen changes in their self-regulation manifest after The Grooming Project: “Being in this program, I learned a lot about stopping and thinking before I act out because there’s always a consequence behind it... I want to be an adult. Back then I was thinking like a young child, you know, not thinking, but now I think before I act.” Another participant shared how self-regulation skills have helped her parenting skills, “[My son] is in the terrible twos, sometimes I just put him in the front room and ... I’ll go into the kitchen, take a couple of deep breaths and then try to go back again because I’ve realized if I go in there with an attitude or get angry with him, it just makes the whole situation worse.”

The Grooming Project’s soft skills educational programming targets self-efficacy and self-regulation as primary intervention points to increase participant employment opportunities, improve family functioning, and participant overall mental health and quality of life. Life skills classes, staff guidance, and the completion of program requirements are aspects of The Grooming Project cited by participants as factors that contributed to improved self-regulation and self-efficacy.

Family Functioning

As a pilot program of EPEC, positive outcomes for the children of participants are an important measure of the program’s effectiveness in breaking the multi-generational cycle of poverty. Therefore, improved family functioning is a targeted outcome for The Grooming Project. The scientific literature indicates that job security is an important foundation for establishing and maintaining strong families (Voydanoff, 1990; Wilson, Larson, & Stone, 1993). Furthermore, each of the outcomes discussed above, including financial stability, housing security, self-efficacy, and self-regulation can all contribute positively towards overall family functioning.

When participants discussed their role as parents before the program, a few participants talked about struggling to support their children and themselves. One participant noted, “I didn’t know how I was gonna feed [my daughter], sometimes I would go without food just so she could eat.” A number of participants talked about losing custody of their kids to state child protective services for a period of time.

Participants also talked about their childhood experiences and how they impacted their own parenting skills. Many reported that they had been raised by someone other than their biological parents, such as aunts and uncles, grandparents or siblings. Some participants talked about surviving physical and psychological abuse. One participant described how The Grooming Project challenged the parenting style she had experienced in her youth:

“Up until I came into this program, the cycle was just repeating itself over and over and over. I was a yeller ... I was very inconsistent in my discipline. Or very inconsistent in any kind of positive reinforcement, too. So, I do believe that we still have some stuff that we will always need to work on, but I think that the cycle has changed.”

Many participants also felt they had positive childhood experiences that they try to incorporate into their own parenting style: “One thing that stuck out to me with my grandma is that no matter what I did I could always go to her and talk. And that’s one thing I’m trying to do with my son as he grows up is teach him there’s always different ways to handle situations.” Another participant who was raised by her aunt and uncle said, “They just let me be a kid. They weren’t forcing me to grow up. They just let me have fun... and that’s how my daughter is. She’s a daredevil.”

Participants that recounted both positive and negative childhood experiences all discussed how The Grooming Project had disrupted negative cycles of behavior caused by multi-generational poverty by strengthening their parenting skills. Some of



the participants noted that they were implementing more structure and consistent discipline strategies with their children after their time in program. One participant discussed her feelings about her new parenting skills, "It's a big difference now. Now that I have my head on straight, I am learning discipline, which before I didn't... I'm taking care of them the right way... They see that I'm doing good so, and... giving me that positive support, too, helps every day." Another individual mentioned the program, "...actually did help make my parenting skills [get] better. I am able to sit down and talk to my son more...Taking those classes and talking about life skills it taught me how to be able to help my son."

A previous study of The Grooming Project found that the children of participants often spoke about seeing their parents as role models after they graduated (Williams, 2017). Participants in the present study shared other ways their family relationships had improved after the program. First, their family expressed pride in them. One graduate said, "...my whole entire family is very proud of me now." Another graduate shared, "I'm proud of myself because now I can be the best mom to my kid." Second, participants reported that by gaining more stability in their employment and finances, they were able to spend more time with their families (Table 15). One individual shared how they believe their relationship with their child "has gotten stronger over the last almost year and a half since I left the school... because I was able... to really spend more time with him and provide things for him that I couldn't before." Another participant said that she was most proud of her ability to provide her daughter with "what she needs and give her what she wants... I'm looking forward to Christmas this year, just know that."

Table 15. Time Spent with Children

	Currently Enrolled	Graduated 0-12 Months Ago	Graduated 1+ Year Ago	Percent of sample
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How often do you attend after school activities with your children?

Never	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	2 (4.8%)	7.1%
Rarely, 5%	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	4.8%
Occasionally, 25%	2 (4.8%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.8%)	9.5%
Sometimes, 50%	1 (2.4%)	5 (11.9%)	5 (11.9%)	26.2%
Often, 75%	3 (7.1%)	3 (7.1%)	1 (2.4%)	16.7%
Yes, all the time	2 (4.8%)	1 (2.4%)	4 (9.5%)	16.7%
Other: Not in school	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	2 (4.8%)	7.1%
I don't have children	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2.4%
N/A	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.4%)	2 (4.8%)	9.5%

How often do you volunteer or attend school events with your children?

Never	4 (9.5%)	3 (7.1%)	3 (7.1%)	23.8%
Rarely, 5%	1 (2.4%)	2 (4.8%)	4 (9.5%)	16.7%
Occasionally, 25%	3 (7.1%)	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.4%)	11.9%
Sometimes, 50%	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.4%)	3 (7.1%)	11.9%
Often, 75%	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	3 (7.1%)	9.5%
Always	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.8%)	4.8%
Other: Child not in custody. Not allowed.	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2.4%
Other: Not in school	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.8%)	2 (4.8%)	9.5%
Other: Too young	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	2.4%
I don't have children	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2.4%
N/A	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.4%)	4.8%

How many evenings a week do you have dinner with your children?

1 evening/week	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0.0%
2 evening/week	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	4.8%
3 evening/week	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2.4%
4 evening/week	0 (0.0%)	3 (7.1%)	1 (2.4%)	9.5%
5 evening/week	2 (4.8%)	2 (4.8%)	4 (9.5%)	19.0%
6 evening/week	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0.0%
7 evening/week	5 (11.9%)	5 (11.9%)	12 (28.6%)	52.4%
I don't have children	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2.4%
N/A	1 (2.4%)	2 (4.8%)	1 (2.4%)	9.5%

How many mornings a week do you have breakfast with your children?

1 morning/week	2 (4.8%)	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.4%)	9.5%
2 morning/week	6 (14.3%)	2 (4.8%)	6 (14.3%)	33.3%
3 morning/week	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.8%)	3 (7.1%)	11.9%
4 morning/week	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	2.4%
5 morning/week	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.8%)	1 (2.4%)	7.1%
6 morning/week	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	2.4%
7 morning/week	1 (2.4%)	3 (7.1%)	5 (11.9%)	21.4%
I don't have children	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2.4%
N/A	1 (2.4%)	2 (4.8%)	1 (2.4%)	9.5%

Sense of Community

Fostering a sense of social cohesion and community can positively influence multiple facets of life, including physical and mental health outcomes (Kuipers, Van Poppel, Van Den Brink, Wingen, & Kunst, 2012; Martikainen, Kauppinen, & Valkonen, 2003; Almedom, 2005; McNeill, Kreuter, & Subramanian, 2006). High levels of social cohesion are also associated with lower rates of alcohol use, fewer perceived alcohol use related problems, and mortality in adolescence (Martikainen et al., 2003; Winstanley et al., 2008). Almedom (2005) found that an individual's social network significantly influences their sense of trust, the sense that they have friends to rely on, and the belief that they have control over their own life. Furthermore, the sense of community associated with employment, like engagement with social and professional networks, contributes to positive outcomes, including a reduction in recidivism rates (Matsueda & Heimer, 1997; Uggen et al., 2004).

Staff at The Grooming Project provide critical social support and community for participants.

One participant stated that, "[The staff] had known me before and... didn't give up on me... they were determined to see me succeed and... they were in my ear constantly... feeding my spirit."

The Grooming Project creates a space for participants to feel a sense of belonging. An individual shared, "This is like my second family. I've always said that. This is like my home. This is my second... home... instead of a school." Each participant expressed gratitude for the emotional support that they received from the staff throughout their time at The Grooming Project.

When asked about their feelings about the staff, several participants expressed their respect for the staff for giving their time to help the program participants. A graduate shared: "All of the people that work here, I have a lot of respect for them... because I am sure that [staff member #1] and [staff member #2] as groomers can make better money working somewhere else and [staff member #3]... and [staff member #4]...they could all make better money doing something somewhere else in their field, but they choose to help us instead."

Participants mentioned that staff remained supportive of the participants after they graduated. A graduate noted, "[Staff member #1] and [staff member #2] still help me to this day, you know if there's something I'm struggling with I can always come here no matter what, and they will always help me through whatever situation I'm in."

One participant described how the social support of The Grooming Project impacted them: "Before this program? I was an angry, lonely, depressed stressed, and hurt person, because I didn't have my kids. And I was homeless, and I didn't have anyone to turn to or have anything or anyone on my side. It was just me by myself, living from house to house, barely working from here to there. I was just a lonely, angry person. And when I got in this program it changed me a whole lot to being a happy [and] successful person. [Now I have] joy, faith, strength, and hope. And I really love these people [here at The Grooming Project] ... now, I have a family."

Relationship with Animals

Dogs are key members of The Grooming Project community, and they provide unique benefits that advance each participants' personal and professional development. Studies of the human-animal bond suggest mechanisms by which the dogs in the program contribute to improved student outcomes. For example, research suggests that the presence of pets can facilitate a sense of community in a neighborhood (Walsh, 2009). They can also play a role in family resilience during periods of change

(Allen, 1995; Cain, 1983). The benefits of having a pet in a household include companionship, pleasure, and attention, along with psychological and social support (Barker, Rogers, Turner, Karpf, & Suthers-McCabe, 2003; Friedmann & Tsai, 2006; Wells, 2009). The scientific literature indicates that children have significantly stronger bonds with pets in single-parent families versus those in two-parent families, and those with pets also developed a higher capacity for empathy (Bodsworth & Coleman, 2001; Melson, 2003). The role of pets within family functioning is often seen as “the glue,” increasing family cohesion and promoting greater interactions and communication (Cain, 1983). Findings suggest having a pet was related to greater life and marital satisfaction, and physical and emotional health (Allen, 1995).

Flynn et al. (2018) examined the impact of animal-assisted interventions in a family preservation program and found that families who interacted with animals during the therapeutic process had improvements in family functioning compared to those who did not interact with animals during the therapeutic process. In particular, the dog provided opportunities for the parents to practice applying new parenting skills, like disciplinary techniques, and created an atmosphere that encouraged families to identify challenges and share personal experiences more quickly (Flynn et al., 2018).

Many participants in The Grooming Project saw similarities between how they interacted with their family and disciplined their children and the animals they were grooming. One participant shared, “Dogs, they act just like kids. They want the love. They want the attention. They feed off your energy. The energy you give off to them... and that’s just like with kids...if they notice that you’re stressed or angry, they get upset ... They feel bad. They feel like they’ve done something wrong and I feel like it helped me [try] to figure out sometimes what certain things are wrong with my kids.”

Pets can teach important strategies for addressing issues that come up within family systems around rules, roles, authority, boundaries, and problem solving. Pets sense and react to the emotional systems within family networks and can, therefore, serve as “emotional barometers” and regulators for moderating stress in relationships (Walsh, 2009). A participant talked about adapting a strategy she used in the grooming salon to brush her daughter’s hair: “She hates having her hair done... from that point, I was just like ‘you know what, at work when a dog is not listening to me, being hard-headed and stubborn ...I play this song from Lion King.’ ‘In the Jungle’ - it actually helps calm the dogs down. And I learned from playing that song ... I play something that my daughter loves... She loves to listen to “The Wheels on the Bus” and that helps calm her down and distracts her from what I’m doing to her [hair].”

Participants also felt that their experience with dogs impacted their ability to relate to other people:



“I have a lot of patience with dogs and now I have more patience with people. Before I would have a temper and just fly off, but now, I can just be more patient.” Another participant shared, “I didn’t used to think I was a people person ... but since being around dogs and stuff and I still have to interact with their owners ... it’s kind of helped me socialize and be able talk more with people. So, it kind of changed me.”

Graduates of the program shared how their perceptions of dogs changed during the course of the program (Table 16). Being afraid of dogs prior to the program was a common issue identified by graduates. They shared that this fear arose from



previous experiences with dog bites or disliking dog hair. One graduate shared that a major lesson they learned at The Grooming Project was “how to handle and be comfortable with the dogs,” noting that, “... I never knew how... to communicate with them, and I didn’t know about how certain things would make them bite me.”

Other participants expressed pride that they could handle challenges and overcome their fear of dogs. One participant said, “Before I couldn’t even stand a dog... I was scared of their dog hair... It freaked me out, and it grossed me out... but once I started... working at The Grooming Project and... seeing how much fun it was and how good they looked... I loved it. And now I’ll let them lick me on the face.”

Graduates discussed how working with dogs fostered a change in their mood, nurturing newfound emotions towards dogs, and the love they feel for them as living beings. Several individuals mentioned that the dogs had a positive impact on their mood and/or personality.

One participant stated, “It is like you are a completely different person when you are with dogs, like they just calm you.”

Walsh (2009) found that human interaction with animals contributes to good health, psychological well-being, and recovery from serious conditions. The physiological health benefits tied to pet ownership include decreased blood pressure and obesity, and in many cases, a pet was better than a partner/friend in alleviating the effects of stress on the heart (Walsh, 2009). Further, animals benefit those with chronic illnesses, such as relieving feelings of depression, loneliness, and low morale. When it comes to psychological benefits, those who connect with animals are believed to have a larger capacity for love, empathy and compassion (Walsh, 2009).

Participants shared experiences about dogs that had especially impacted them during their time at The Grooming Project, “I had a dog named [omitted] who’s a really good dog except for when you go to do his head. He tries to bite ... I learned from him that if you just come at things easier and slower, you can just get things done a lot better.

So, I feel like he impacted me by teaching me to take one day at a time ... and soak it in instead of rushing ... And I feel like once I learned that, it made things a lot easier.” Another participant talked about the dog she related to the most, “He kinda looked like the dog version of grumpy cat. He was funny. But he got kicked out of the program because he is dog aggressive... But the reason that I liked [him] is because he’s kinda like me, he’s super misunderstood. You know?”

Table 16. Participant Relationship with Dogs

	Currently Enrolled	Graduated 0-12 Months Ago	Graduated 1+ Year Ago	Percent of Sample*
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Has being a student at The Grooming Project changed how you think about dogs?

No	3 (7.1%)	2 (4.8%)	9 (21.4%)	33.3%
Yes	8 (19.0%)	9 (21.4%)	10 (23.8%)	64.3%
Yes and No	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	2.4%

How would you describe the role of dogs in our lives?*

Best friend	2 (4.8%)	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.4%)	9.5%
Companion	2 (4.8%)	2 (4.8%)	0 (0.0%)	9.5%
Family	9 (21.4%)	10 (23.8%)	18 (42.9%)	88.1%
Guard	2 (4.8%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	7.1%
Protector	4(9.5%)	1 (2.4%)	3 (7.1%)	19.0%

Would having a dog positively impact your family dynamics?

I'm unsure	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	4.8%
Depends	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	2.4%
Other: Yes, but only if they are financially capable of taking good care of him/her.	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2.4%
Yes	9 (21.4%)	11 (26.2%)	18 (42.9%)	90.5%

* The totals are greater than 100% because some participants selected multiple options.

The Grooming Project also fostered a new love or sustained graduates' love for dogs. One participant talked about getting their own dog after participating in the program, "If I have a negative situation that I have to deal with, I have a dog. He's my emotional support. I talk to my dog a whole lot and he gives me a lot of joy... I talk to him, I wrestle with him, I play with him and all that anger, all that frustration, the stress is put in the back. I pray with my dog, we eat together, and that's my baby." Working with dogs also prompted graduates to feel like they had established "a great connection with them" and were able to build empathy towards them, especially when dogs came into the program in bad health. One person noted: "It broke my heart to see them come in matted...like some of them were to the skin. And it just...that was actually difficult for me to see."

Through these connections they were able to become more aware of dogs' species-specific behaviors, which fostered greater respect for them. Participants noted that they now pay attention to the fact that "dogs have feelings" and that dogs "have a different language than us and [we need] to learn their language and learn how to interact with [them]." One participant described their favorite dog to work with at The Grooming Project, saying, "If you have a stressful day, that would be a dog you want to cuddle with even though he slobbers a whole lot. I can talk to him about my problems, you know, he listens." The Grooming Project also taught them how to recognize dogs' health and welfare while also advocating for their wellbeing as groomers. One student mentioned, "I've definitely learned a whole lot more when it comes to...who's a good dog owner, who's a bad dog owner, what to search for, what to report if there's, you know, something bad going on when a dog comes in."

Throughout their interviews, participants recognized dogs as important partners in their personal growth: as a parent, as a family member, and as a friend. Serving as companions, or simply non-judgmental social beings, dogs helped participants discover more about themselves and the way they interacted with the world around them.

When thinking about how the knowledge and skills graduates gained from working with dogs impacted their conceptualization of dogs and how they interacted with them, the theme of advocacy and respect arose from the interview content. Participants from the program shared how they learned to see dogs as more than just an animal, that “when you get that knowledge about them and study them you get to learn more about them and realize that they are more than just an animal. If you open up your arms to them, they are your family.”

Conclusion

The findings of this preliminary study suggest that The Grooming Project can transform the lives of its clients. Individuals living in poverty, driven by lack of opportunity due to low educational attainment, involvement in the criminal justice system, chronic substance abuse and unstable housing and transportation situations, can move toward greater self-efficacy with the support of the program.

This journey, marked by decreases in previous negative behaviors and increases in vocational skills, self-regulation and social connection, can lead to gainful employment, family stabilization and a break in the multi-generational cycle of poverty.

While the journey requires courage and perseverance, specific aspects of The Grooming Project, including its staff, life skills classes and the dogs themselves, uniquely support the students toward their goals. Future research will aim to detail the social and economic impacts of this program on the individual clients and the broader community and to identify the mechanisms that lead to life transformation. Findings from these studies will allow The Grooming Project to optimize its programming to further improve outcomes for its students and their families.



Methodology

This study integrated analyses of both quantitative and qualitative data to assess any changes experienced by participants in The Grooming Project over time.

Quantitative Methods

A survey was administered to all current and past participants in The Grooming Project to assess shifts that may have occurred for participants before, during, and after their enrollment in the program. This survey included 47 multiple choice questions and one open ended question addressing the themes of participants' employment, financial stability, health insurance, use of government assistance, housing stability, family functioning, and relationship with animals.

The survey was designed and administered by The Grooming Project's Director of Student Services. An email was sent out by The Director of Student Services to all current and former program participants, inviting them to participate in a survey that would help improve The Grooming Project's programming and outcomes. The email informed the students that the survey was completely optional and that confidentiality would be ensured for those who participated. Former students who were interested in participating were given three date and time options to go to The Grooming Project's location to fill out the survey. In a few cases, participants were interested in completing the survey but could not attend the date and time options advertised. In these cases, a case manager for The Grooming Project brought the survey to participants and administered it to them. The survey was also administered by The Director of Student Services to currently enrolled students at The Grooming Project during a life skills class. Those who participated in the survey received \$35, free childcare, snacks, and a chance to win a big screen TV in a raffle.

Data collected from the survey were compiled by The Director of Student Services, then sent to the research team for analysis as de-identified lists. After analyzing the data, the research team separated the responses received from the 42 participants into three categories: currently enrolled in The Grooming Project, graduated 0-12 months ago, and graduated a year or more ago. The research team separated the data into these three categories to identify common themes and changes for students that occurred over time.

Qualitative Methodology

This study used an emergent study design and a two-phase phenomenological qualitative approach to understand how The Grooming Project impacted the students' social, emotional, and financial stability and the health of their families. This qualitative component of the study addressed the following themes from the perspective of The Grooming Project students: experiences with government assistance, housing security, transportation stability, emotional stability, coping skills, self-efficacy, family functioning, and relationships with dogs.

This study focused on describing the lived experiences of The Grooming Project students and graduates, and the impacts that their time with the program had on their personal and family's development. The phenomenological approach was appropriate to capture the impacts of The Grooming Project because of its emphasis on identifying common meanings that underly a variety of different individuals' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach prevents researchers' assumptions and biases from directing the interpretation of results by elevating the perspective of the participants as legitimate. Using this approach produces information with a high level of validity, which can direct further inquiries or identify important implications for practice (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999).

An emergent qualitative design was used for this study to facilitate participant-guided research dependent on themes discussed during interviews. Emergent study designs allow researchers to respond to information and insights found during the research process (Given, 2008). This type of design is also well-suited to study the personal narratives of individuals because of its flexibility, allowing for researchers to discover new themes described by participants, and allowing for a deeper exploration of experiences common to multiple participants. After data from the first round of semi-structured interviews was collected and analyzed, researchers designed a second set of qualitative questions based on insights shared by participants during the first round of interviews.

Interview Participants

All interview participants were recruited in collaboration with The Grooming Project's leadership team, using emails and direct outreach to detail the purpose of the study. Participants were sent an initial recruitment email by the director of The Grooming Project. The recruitment email included a description of the study, information about the study procedures, and that participation in the study was optional. Interested participants met with researchers at The Grooming Project. Each participant received \$35 as compensation for their time and as an incentive to participate. The target sample size ($n = 12$) was chosen based on standard sample sizes for phenomenological studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Inclusion criteria for the interviews included any students who had been enrolled in The Grooming Project within the last five years.

Data Collection Procedures

The first round of interviews was conducted by the research staff with 12 participants of The Grooming Project according to a University of Denver IRB-approved protocol (DU IRB protocol #1436083-2). Prior to administering any interview questions, each participant received information regarding their rights as a research participant and was then given the opportunity to ask questions about the study before verbally consenting to participate.

Participants then completed a 30-minute interview, which was conducted in The Grooming Project's conference room to encourage participants to speak openly. The interviews consisted of seven open-ended questions. To collect as much narrative data as possible, participants were asked about their experiences before, during and after their enrollment in The Grooming Project. The questions were:

- 1. When did you graduate from The Grooming Project?**
- 2. Tell me about your life prior to joining The Grooming Project.**
- 3. Tell me about your experience going through The Grooming Project's program.**
- 4. What is your life like after your time with The Grooming Project?**
- 5. How has participation in The Grooming Project impacted your ability to manage challenges in your life?**
- 6. How has being in the program affected how you interact with your kids?**
- 7. How has being in the program affected how you view and interact with dogs?**

To reduce researcher bias, prompts were designed to be open-ended and avoided leading questions. Audio recordings of the interviews were stored on password-protected devices and later transcribed, coded and analyzed by the research team. Transcriptions and audio files of the interviews were kept in password protected electronic folders at the University of Denver. Transcripts were reviewed by an additional team member to ensure accuracy.

After the coding and analysis of the first round of interviews was completed, an additional set of open-ended research questions were developed by the research team to further explore themes and experiences that were mentioned in multiple participant interviews. The areas of interest identified included: participant experiences with the government assistance benefits cliff-effect, participant emotional stability and self-regulation, participant family functioning, and the human-animal component of The Grooming Project's programming. The research team again worded questions to allow individuals to share components of their experience whether there were positive, negative, or no impacts.

The research team submitted the second round of interview questions as an IRB protocol amendment and received approval by the University of Denver's IRB. The research team then returned to The Grooming Project and re-consented the same 12 participants that were initially interviewed for the second round of interviews.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were examined by the research team for broad themes using a phenomenological approach to identify each participant's unique, lived experiences and understandings (Banonis, 1989). The research team utilized a seven-step process of data analysis to develop a detailed understanding of The Grooming Project's participant experiences (Diekelmann et al., 1989). The research team proceeded with the following steps to analyze the transcripts: 1. read each transcript; 2. identified a set of themes or general meaning for each interview; 3. identified specific quotes from transcripts where participants described their lived experiences; 4. reviewed selected quotes within an interview and then identified common emergent themes for the interviewee's experience; 5. grouped themes together across the various interviews; 6. coded transcripts with these identified themes. This process allowed for rigorous and consistent interpretation and analysis of the data according to best practices in phenomenological methods (Diekelmann et al., 1989).

After identified themes were coded in all transcripts, they were integrated into the narrative report. The report was organized according to the overarching themes, such as education and family functioning, identified during the analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. Direct quotes from qualitative interviews were largely used to support identified themes in order to ensure that the described lived experience of participants was accurately conveyed.

About the Authors: The Institute for Human-Animal Connection

The Institute for Human-Animal Connection (IHAC) intentionally elevates the value of the living world and the interrelationship and health of people, other animals, and the environment. This is accomplished through natural and social science-informed education, applied knowledge, research and advocacy, with an ethical regard for all species.

IHAC's research agenda aims to advance the human-animal-environmental interaction (HAEI) field by developing a portfolio of studies that provide both critical and unique insights into the relationships between humans, animals, and the environment. Guided by principles of efficacy, beneficence, and justice, the portfolio will explore data-based assessments of the impacts of animals in both therapeutic and non-therapeutic (community) settings. Each study is conducted using a robust research design that measures the impacts of the intervention in a holistic manner informed by the systems view of social problems that is intrinsic to social work best practice, which may entail exploring innovative theories, technologies, or methodologies that have not yet been incorporated into HAI research.

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