

Communication Skills Building: Program History

Why Communication Skills Building?

In 2005, the Office on Women's Health (OWH) convened a panel of adolescent health experts to talk about preteens and their health. The experts discussed research that shows that preteens who have strong and open lines of communication with their parents are more likely to finish school, less likely to get involved with drugs and alcohol, and less likely to become teenage parents. After the meeting, the experts decided there should be a program to help parents talk to their daughters before, during, and after the girls' teenage years. Among their conclusions were the following:

- Important conversations on key prevention topics should begin as early as possible, not later than between the ages of 9 and 11.
- Education of parents addresses barriers, such as misconceptions about adolescent behavior and ideas about what constitutes good parenting.
- The greatest need for a communication skills building program was found among African-American and Hispanic parents and caregivers.

To follow up, OWH conducted research with African-American and Hispanic parents, girls, and the community organizations that supported them in order to better understand their needs and to determine the best response. A summary follows.

African-American Research

In December 2006, OWH led focus groups with African-American girls ages 12 to 14, and with African-American mothers of girls between 9 and 14 years old. A total of six focus groups were held in Baltimore, MD, and Oakland, CA.

The focus groups revealed that there was a disconnect between parents' and daughters' understanding of each other's behavior and behavioral expectations. Mothers acknowledged a need for training and support to equip

them with better ways to communicate with their daughters. The mothers wanted to learn several key skills:

- How to take time to think before reacting to a situation.
- How to tell the difference between reacting and overreacting.
- How to start the "hard" conversations on topics like sex, drugs, and dating.

African-American mothers also said they wanted a "visual product" where they could see people who looked like them. They were interested in a tool they could use with their daughters, such as a video.

Developing African-American Materials

OWH drafted a script of the mother-daughter interactions for the scenarios for which parents requested the most support: dating, experimentation with smoking, discipline, appropriate dress, and time management. In each scenario, a stressful conflict was presented, each mother and daughter explained their points of view, and then a more positive interaction was presented.

Once the script was drafted, organizations that worked with African-American parents, including Parents Anonymous, Sasha Bruce Youthwork, the National Association of Black Social Workers, and the Office on Minority Health, reviewed the script. Based on their input, the script was modified, and storyboards for the videos were created.

OWH also developed a facilitator's guide, with step-by-step instructions for community leaders to host workshops, and a tip sheet for parents to complement the videos. These materials were pretested with families and facilitators in three areas: Baltimore, MD; Jackson, MS; and Chicago, IL.

All information and materials were updated and finalized based on pretesting feedback.



Hispanic Research

After the African-American materials were developed, OWH led a round of focus groups with Hispanic parents of girls in June 2010. A total of five focus groups were held in Puerto Rico; Miami, FL; and Los Angeles, CA.

As in the African-American focus groups, there was a disconnect between Hispanic parents' and daughters' understanding of each other's behavior and behavioral expectations. Hispanic parents wanted to learn two skills in particular:

- How to best approach the following difficult topics: dating; experimentation with tobacco, drugs, and alcohol; discipline and the role of the father; behavior and interactions outside the home; appropriate dress; time management; and money management.
- How to think before reacting and overreacting.

Hispanic parents also said they wanted materials to be available in Spanish and that videos would be more effective than print materials, because they would be able to see people like them going through similar issues. They

also wanted the parent-daughter conflicts to include extended family members, such as grandparents and godparents.

Developing Hispanic Materials

Based on the research, OWH drafted a Spanish video script and used a soap opera, or *telenovela*, format to demonstrate each parent-daughter conflict. A Spanish-language facilitator's guide, with step-by-step instructions for community leaders to host workshops, and a tip sheet for parents were also created.

Next, OWH led English and Spanish field testing with Hispanic parents and grandparents of girls ages 9 to 15 in May and August 2011. The groups took place in Chicago, IL, and Washington, DC.

The Communication Skills Building program was positively received, especially by groups that were Spanish-language dominant (i.e., Hispanics who most frequently use or prefer to use Spanish). All participants agreed that the conflicts in the videos were easy to understand and that they would share the lessons learned with other Hispanic parents.