

Teen Pregnancy Prevention: Characteristics of Promising Programs

Teen pregnancy and early childbearing are complex issues which are linked to a number of factors, including poverty, school failure, early behavioral issues, family instability and sexual abuse. There are many ways to incorporate prevention education into messages, programs and communication venues reach young people. Not every program has the opportunity for a rigorous evaluation to document effectiveness, but there are characteristics of effective programs that can be used to guide planning, implementation and evaluation efforts.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- **Set clearly defined and realistic program goals and objectives.** A program to delay the initiation of sexual intercourse will be different than a program whose goal is to encourage teen parents to delay a rapid, subsequent pregnancy.
- **Encourage community collaboration.** There are many individuals and groups that can play an important role and provide resources in a prevention partnership.
- **Involve youth in developing the program and keeping it real.** Find ways to involve teens from needs assessment and program design through implementation and evaluation. As the target audience, their on-going input and feedback is critical.
- **Create activities that are age and developmentally appropriate.** Know your target audience and provide for varying levels of cognitive development.
- **Provide culturally appropriate program activities.** Activities should be relevant, and appropriate for the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the participants.
- **Messages should focus on both young women and men.** Sexual responsibility, communication techniques and assertiveness/refusal skills are gender-neutral issues.
- **Offer appropriate length, level and consistency of support.** Some youth are at low risk and need little support to prevent a pregnancy, others will require more comprehensive interventions over a sustained period of time.
- **Abstinence, contraception and motivation are important.** Messages that support postponing sexual activity are important for those who have not yet initiated it, as well as those who are sexually active. Sexually active teens also require medically accurate sexual health education, combined with accessible and affordable contraceptive and reproductive health services. Both groups need the motivation to make responsible decisions that protect their health and well-being.

SEXUALITY EDUCATION

All young people need age appropriate, medically accurate sexuality education presented by knowledgeable, trusted adults to protect their sexual health and prepare them for healthy adult relationships. Programs are most effective when they:

- **Provide accurate information on both abstinence and contraception**
- **Are developmentally appropriate and relevant to the target population**
- **Encourage skill development, including decision-making, assertiveness training, refusal and negotiation skills and learning to access health services**

CONTRACEPTIVE SERVICES

Sensitive, well-trained and non-judgmental staff members play an important role by helping male and female teens learn about and decide to use contraception effectively and consistently. Teen-friendly services are most effective when they:

- **Guarantee confidentiality**
- **Offer accessible hours, including walk-in appointments, along with flexible and extended hours during evenings and weekends**
- **Offer a convenient setting where teens naturally congregate**
- **Provide free-of-charge or affordable services (on a sliding fee scale)**
- **Offer directive contraceptive education and counseling**
- **Offer to delay the pelvic exam at the initial visit**

MOTIVATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND RELATED SERVICES

For teens at highest risk, prevention strategies include improving educational and economic opportunities and addressing numerous social and psychological factors linked with sexual risk-taking. Programs should be designed to include access to:

- **Psychosocial counseling, including treatment for sexual abuse, drug and alcohol use and/or family distress**
- **Mentoring programs for youth to develop trusting relationships with adults**
- **Educational support, including tutoring and access to higher education**
- **Opportunities that encourage their interests, such as sports, art or music**
- **Vocational and job skills, including internships and job placement**
- **Relevant volunteer and service-learning opportunities**