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ABSTRACT

              Although information regarding the consequences of
adolescent pregnancy and childbirth is disseminated, the recipients
of that information are most often adults. To present this
information directly to never-pregnant adolescents, an annual
conference, outside of the authority structure of the school was
developed in Bangor, Maine. The three primary outcome goals of the
conference are to identify community resources, identify resources
for school-based follow-up programs, and to encourage teens to serve
as resources to their peers. The conference is coordinated by four
volunteer professionals, with an advisory panel of teens and adults
assisting in planning the agenda and in identifying topics,
facilitators, teen parents, and community professionals for panel
discussions and film presentations. Community agencies and parents
are solicited to underwrite costs. A small registration fee helps
offset costs without prohibiting attendance. The organizers handle
hall rental and advertising. The conference is held during school
hours to maximize attendance. Evaluations of the conferences have
shown that attendance increased from 180 the first year to 600 in
subsequent years. Information about contraception, learning to say
"no" to sexual involvement, and communicating with parents is
consistently cited as most useful. Both films and teen panel
discussions are rated highly. The focus of the conference has
expanded from teenage pregnancy and sexuality to general adolescent
development. (BL)

USING A PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCE MODEL TO TEACH

ADOLESCENTS ABOUT SCHOOL-AGE PARENTHOOD

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Key Concepts: School-Age Parenthood, Adolescent Development,
                Adolescent Sexuality, Sex Education

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USING A PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCE MODEL TO TEACH

ADOLESCENTS ABOUT SCHOOL-AGE PARENTHOOD

Efforts to inform never-pregnant adolescents of the consequences
of adolescent pregnancy and parenting are not as thorough as efforts
to inform adults. This article outlines a professional conference
model organized to sensitize adolescents to the consequences of
school-age parenthood. Implications of the conference for community
education are discussed.

USING A PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCE MODEL TO TEACH
ADOLESCENTS ABOUT SCHOOL-AGE PARENTHOOD

Introduction

Census date reflect a 22% decline of total births in the United States from 1960-1978. However, during the same time span, births to women under the age of 20 declined only 9%. Thus, the total proportion of births to women under the age of 20 actually is increasing (National Center for Health Statistics, 1974; 1980). Currently over one half-million adolescent women deliver each year.

Educators, researchers, and human service providers have united to disseminate publically information regarding the antecedants and consequences of adolescent pregnancy and childbearing. These authors catalogue the obstetrical and prenatal risks and lower educational and economic outcomes often experienced by the adolescents (e.g., Card & Wise, 1978; Chilman, 1980; Lincoln, 1981; Phipps-Yonas, 1980), as well as the frequent behavioral and educational problems encountered by their offspring (e.g., Baldwin & Cain, 1980). These outcomes are not uniform for all adolescent-headed families; support by the family of origin, (Furstenberg, 1976; 1980), early and high quality prenatal care (Sandler, Vietze & O'Conner, 1981), and assistance in completion of education (Osofsky and Osofsky, 1970) often mitigate the negative outcomes for both the adolescents and their offspring. Consequently, intervention efforts tend to focus on these areas to assist the already pregnant adolescent and help her prevent future pregnancies.

Efforts to prevent the first pregnancy during adolescence by disseminating this information to the never-pregnant adolescents are less conspicious. Controversy regarding whether educ ition about sexuality and its outcomes belongs in the realm of public educational settings, or, if it does, exactly what should be taught, often precludes good preventative information from reaching the persons most directly involved in this issue -the youths themselves (Scales, 1981). Adolescents interested in specific books on the topic of adolescent pregnancy and parenting may avail themselves of Marion Howard's Only Human (1975) or Patricia Dizenzo's Phoebe (1970) for excellent descriptions of the feelings, difficulties, and dilemmas experienced by teenage parents. However, deLissovoy (1978) cogently argues that adolescents are concerned with their own physical development and future goals. Parenting is not an immediate goal. Therefore they probably will place a low priority on such readings about parenting unless they are already pregnant or parents. Thus, these volumes are likely to have limited audience among never-pregnant adolescents. A more potent stimulus for never-pregnant adolescents might be their peers who are pregnant, especially peers who are close friends. Even then, however, never-pregnant adolescents may avoid asking their pregnant colleagues for information because they do not consider the possibility that pregnancy could happen to them. To address this problem, a group of social service providers organized a conference to present information directly to these never-pregnant teens.

Thornburg (1982) reviews studies over the last four decades that consistently show peers to be the major source of sex information for adolescents. By organizing this conference and involving adolescents in the planning and presentations, the authority structure of schools could be bypassed. The conference would set the occasion for discussion among teens, with adults available as resources to clarify information.

Professional Conference Model

Purpose

Initially, increased awareness in the community of adolescents and adults of issues surrounding school-age parenthood was the goal of the conference planners. The program reflected general information about adolescent sexuality and its consequences. Specific attention was drawn to the consequence of adolescent pregnancy and parenthood. Over the several years of the conference experience, a wider focus has emerged, placing the issues of adolescent sexuality and parenting into the larger context of general adolescent development.

Of and For Adolescents

Remembering that much information already exists for adults, and that the target audience of this conference is teens, several principles guide decision-making of conference organizers. Recognizing that adolescents view the world from different perspectives than adults, adolescents are recruited to participate in annual planning meetings. When the adults organizers launch grandiose plans that might attract regional or national

notice from other adults, these adolescents redirect the planning to its original function - to serve teens, not other adults.

The adolescent focus also influences selection of speakers. Persons who have credibility among adolescents can deliver information to teens more effectively than international authorities in adolescent development. Thus, a local successful football coach on one occasion delivered the welcoming address to some five hundred adolescents who knew him.

To maximize the probability that attendees will learn from the conference, the program reflects a balance between presentation of information and audience participation. Films and slides shows produced specifically for teen audiences are used to present facts about adolescent development and sexuality. Panels of teens, some of whom are parents, interact with the audience, responding to the questions and concerns of the audience rather than limiting themselves to a predetermined message. These panel members are recruited by cooperating agencies that provide services to pregnant adolescents and adolescent parents. Each year, the panel consists of one adolescent father, two women who became mothers when they were in their teens, and one woman who gave up her child for adoption. No woman who choose abortion has ever volunteered to participate on the panel.

Audience participation is prompted in several ways. Teens submit questions (anonymously) to the teen panel members and other presenters. Also, during part of the conference, the audience is divided into small groups that discuss specific issues raised by the films, slide shows, and panel presentation. An adult facilitator is available to help focus the group interaction. When possible, teens who will agree to do so are asked to co-facilitate. Their presence often helps evoke more contributions from the participating teens.

Outcome Goals

Three primary outcome goals are sought. First, the conference identifies community resources for teens and adults alike. Second, school personnel identify which of those resources are available to do follow-up programs in the schools. Finally, the participating teens are encouraged to serve as resources for other teens who have not attended.

Organization and Execution of the Conference.

This professional conference concept has been used successfully for four years in Bangor, Maine. The following paragraphs describe the sequence of events that occurs each year.

1. Overall coordination of the conference planning and orchestration is handled by three or four professionals. This fact seems important to ensure more flexibility than would a larger planning board for the repeated meetings that are necessary to attend to the mechnical details of conducting this large endeavor. The point cannot be overemphasized that this core group does much of this work on a volunteer basis. Their employers often support the conference with publicity, secretarial support, occasional monetary donations, and some release time from employment obligations. Primarily, however, this conference succeeds because interested professionals volunteer, not because they are paid to conduct it.

2. Once the core of planners is organized, community agencies that provide services to adolescents in general, and school-age parents more specifically, are identified who are willing to under-write the costs of mailing, phone, printing, conference hall rentals, and the like. A small registration fee from the participants usually defrays these costs, making

the conference a self-supporting venture. However, these agencies serve as a back-up should the revenues not cover the costs.

3. An advisory panel of teens and adults is solicited to help plan the agenda and identify persons to serve as facilitators for the workshops. Facilitators usually are adults who work with adolescents in some capacity as well as students who agree to team with an adults to co-facilitate sessions. Having the adult-teen team often increases discussion among the teen participants.

4. After deciding the agenda, the organizers manage the details of posters, registration, and hall rentals. Schools, churches, and youth groups are contacted to enlist the support of those who work directly with teens. The conference is scheduled to begin at 9:00 a.m. and conclude by 2:30 p.m. so that schools might send students and have them return within the time framework of the regular school day. Media coverage advertises the conference to parents, to invite them to attend with their sons and daughters.

5. The final pre-conference step is to meet with the workshop facilitators to discuss techniques that can help foster and focus discussions. During this meeting, major conference themes are clarified and suggestions aired that might help tie the facts presented to the conference audience meeting as a whole to the workshops.

6. Table 1 shows a sample program. While the program varies from year to year based on feedback from conference participants, this sample is representative of the general organization and topics.

Discussion

A Conference on School-Age Parenthood has been held annually for three years in Bangor, Maine. Initially, 180 participants from the greater Bangor area attended. Many in attendance were adults - educators, parents, school board members - who were curious about what information was to be presented. Response to the first conference was positive. Some of the schools that had sent adult representatives, asked the presenters to come to do follow-up programs in the schools. When the second conference was held in 1980, some 600 persons attended representing nearly every geographical region of the state. For the third year, advertising was limited to only the central region of the state; again nearly 600 persons attended. Using attendance as an indicator, this conference has proved both practical and successful.

Feedback questionnaires are distributed each year to the conferees. In response to an open question about how the conference helped the participant learn/understand adolescent sexuality and/or pregnancy, adolescents most frequently cited information about contraception, learning to say "no" to sexual involvement, and the usefullness of communicating with parents and other adults about their sexuality. When asked to list which of the scheduled events they considered the "highlight" of the conference, the teen panels and film slide show presentations were most mentioned frequently each year. This feedback from participants usually is corroborated by the adolescent members of the advisory board. They lobby persuasively to continue these formats and to think of more ways for teens to present the information. This constitutes a repeated message to the adult planners, that adolescents seem to respond more positively to facts presented by other adolescents than to the same facts presented by adults.

Implications

This conference model can be implemented as a community education project. Being unattached to any formal educational setting, any interested person can attend. While directed primarily for adolescents, parents who wish to teach their own children about sexuality but considers themselves not adequately informed can use the conference to educate themselves. Not uncommon is the situation where parents come with their adolescent sons and daughters to get a common information base from which they can open discussions later in their own homes.

The registration fee is kept low to allow all interested persons to be able to afford the bill. Yet revenues nearly cover expenditures. Thus, with the volunteered time of interested adults and teens, the conference is nearly self-supporting. Information to adolescents does not have to be truncated in the absence of grant monies.

Finally, this type of conference does not have to be limited to the issue of school-age parenthood. In fact; responding to adolescent queries for more information about "normal adolescence," the most current conference was called simply the Teen Conference. Ultimately, this conference can serve to educate entire communities about developing adolescents.

Table 1

Teen Conference 1982

PROGRAM

8:30 - 9:00   Registration and juice or coffee

9:00 - 9:20   Welcome: State Commissioner of Education -

9:20 -11:30   Videotape and small group discussions "Maine Kids -
                 Just Listen to Us" (Taped interviews of teens
                 talking about their relationships with family
                 and society.)

11:30 -12:00   Brown Bag lunch

12:00 - 1:00   Teen experience panel.   Questions from the audience

1:00 - 1:30   Keynote address on "The Cinderella Myth"

1:30 - 2:30   Information Workshops
                     (choose one)

                 1.   Saying "No"

                 2.   Acquaintance Rape

                 3.   Contraception

                 4.   Sexually Transmitted Disease

                 5.   Healthy Baby - Chance or Choice

2:30 - 3:00   Wrap-up of the day's session

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