

Engaging Young Men

Young men are an important segment of the population for efforts to reduce teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, yet they are often not the target of prevention education activities and health care services. Sometimes, they are even left out of such efforts. Young men have been historically excluded for many reasons, both political and ideological, but including them in health care services and prevention programs is currently viewed as good practice. The research demonstrating best practices for engaging young men is much less robust than the research for young women; however, there is adequate support to guide professionals in selecting approaches to maximize positive results.

Myth Busting

Young men are often thought of in negative terms regarding sexual, reproductive, and parenting behaviors. Myths about young men's engagement in sexual activity, use of contraception, and views on fatherhood are common. Additionally, young men are not thought to have education and care needs similar to young women in matters of sexual and reproductive development. In order to effectively reach young men, professionals need to understand the actual knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of young men to help them feel respected rather than stereotyped.

Facts

Males experience developmental stages of adolescence and sexual development in manners different from, but similar to, females.

According to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), 33.3% of males and 34.3% of females report having sex within the past three months.¹

According to National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the majority of sexually experienced teens (78% of females and 85% of males) use contraceptives the first time they have sex.²

According to YRBSS, 33% of males and 46.4% of females report NOT using a condom during last intercourse.¹

Forty-six percent of teen males report that they would be very upset and 34% report that they would be a little upset, if they got someone pregnant.²

Delivering Health Care Services to Young Men

The onset of menses and sexual activity are significant triggers for young girls to initiate health care. Public and private systems—and their correlated funding structures—support the utilization of such services. The same systems and funding structures are not in place for young men. Although both young men and women mature in stages and can benefit from education and preventative services to increase their understanding of their changing bodies and to detect developmental or health issues, young men may not recognize the need for such services. Further, health care professionals may not recognize young men's needs. Years of stereotyping males may play a role in the delivery and receipt of services, since young men often report that seeking health care denotes weakness and is not part of “being a man.”³

Common Barriers to the Receipt of Health Care Services by Young Men

- Puberty does not trigger the search for health care services the same way it does for young women.
- Identifying with male stereotypes may create fear or stigma that inhibits the utilization of health care.
- STIs and other health issues may be asymptomatic.
- Young men may not know where to go for services.
- Components of care for young men have not been clearly defined, so most young men do not know what care they should receive.
- Insurance or public funding may be lacking.
- Services are often female-focused.
- Young men may fear lack of confidentiality.

Young men would benefit from reproductive services that include:

- Anticipation of—and guidance through—development and body changes;
- Support regarding gender identity and messages about masculinity;
- Screening for STIs/HIV;
- Comprehensive sexuality education; and
- Support to create goals and thus delay parenting.

Delivering Health Education Programs to Young Men

Effective prevention programs for young men include a variety of co-ed sexuality education programs,^{4,5} a parent-child communication program,⁵ a clinic-based intervention,⁶ and two service learning programs:⁵

Sexuality Education Programs

- Postponing Sexual Involvement
- Reducing the Risk
- Rochester AIDS Prevention Program
- Safer Choices
- Draw the Line/Respect the Line
- Sex Can Wait
- Self Center
- School/Community Risk Reduction Replication Initiative
- Children's Aid Society Carrera Program
- Seattle Social Development Project
- Aban Aya Youth Project

Service Learning Programs

- Reach for Health Service Learning Program
- Teen Outreach Program

Parent-Child Communication Program

- R.E.A.L Men

Clinic-based Intervention

Reproductive Health Counseling for Young Men

Benefits: The benefits of including young men in prevention programs are similar to those for young women. By guiding male teens through body changes and emotional upheavals, such programs can prevent concerns and promote healthy behaviors. Prevention programs can help teens address their gender identity and definitions of masculinity/femininity in positive ways. Finally, these programs can help teens understand how to negotiate sexual activity and prevent pregnancies and STIs. These benefits are as critical to males as to females. Like young women, young men will benefit from positive youth development messages, such as establishing achievable goals and understanding the role that teen

pregnancy and parenting can play in achieving those goals. Additionally, young fathers generally want to be engaged with their children but sometimes lack the appropriate knowledge or are marginalized by systems that penalize rather than support their efforts.

Tips and Best Practices for Engaging Young Men

Perhaps the most critical step in engaging young men is to create a male-positive environment. This can be accomplished by something as simple as adding male-oriented materials to a service site, or as complex as carrying out a full-scale revamping of service structures, including professional development for staff. Whatever activity is undertaken, young men must perceive it as authentic and meaningful.

The following best practices for engaging young men are derived from the synthesis of two reports.^{4,7}

- Don't make young men an "add-on"—intentionally create services that address their needs.
- Ask young men what they want and need.
- Be creative with recruitment—go to where they are.
- Make teen pregnancy prevention relevant to other aspects of their lives.
- Collaborate with other agencies to broaden services.
- Address gender norms.
- Acknowledge developmental phases.
- Create services that last more than one year.
- Go beyond the classroom; for example, add service learning.
- Include a cultural component.

References

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