

Best Practices for Family Engagement in Sex Education Implementation

Parents and guardians are critical partners in both the planning and implementation of sex education in schools. Generally, parents and guardians are supportive of sex education and engaging them in the curriculum or program adoption process can help ensure successful implementation. This document includes some ideas and suggestions about how to engage families.

BEFORE A CURRICULUM IS SELECTED OR A PROGRAM BEGINS:

Family engagement should be planned from the beginning. Opening up your doors to parents and guardians early, before plans are set, sends the message that their input and opinions are critical and valued. It can also mitigate controversy and build support for implementation. Suggested steps:

- Include parents, guardians and other family members in the needs assessment, if you are conducting one. What do families want for their children in terms of sex education and teen pregnancy prevention education? What are parent/guardian knowledge levels? How can families and schools work together as partners to enhance sex education in the school and at home? What information and skills would be useful for them? What beliefs or fears do they hold around sexual health education? Use what you find in the needs assessment as a factor in the curriculum selection process and let families know how their input was used.
- Include parents, guardians and other family members in the curriculum selection process.
 - Recruit several parents to sit on the curriculum selection committee or use a standing committee (e.g., School Health Advisory Committee) that includes family members.
 - Give all parents, guardians and other family members the opportunity to weigh in on a curriculum before it is selected by providing opportunities for them to review copies of curricular materials. For example, curricula materials could be made available in the front office of the school, at a school open house or curriculum preview night. Be sure to have someone available to answer questions and note suggestions and concerns and/or provide the name of someone they can call or email with questions or concerns. Include a short survey to collect their thoughts.
 - Make sure families understand how the selection process works – criteria that were used in selecting the curriculum for review (e.g. evidenced-based, age appropriate, cultural appropriateness, etc.), how the final decision will be made and when implementation will take place.

ONCE THE CURRICULUM HAS BEEN SELECTED:

- Create a simple information sheet specifically for families about the curriculum that can be sent home with students, put in a newsletter or posted on the web. In the document describe the curriculum selection process, the goals of the program and the parent/guardian role in the curriculum.
- In all communications, emphasize the full benefits of the curriculum beyond sex education. Virtually all evidenced-based sexuality curricula teach skills broader skills that are essential for many parts of a youth's life such as: healthy relationships, listening, self advocacy and refusal skills. Health education, including sexuality education, also promotes academic achievement.
- Host a family night to showcase the curriculum. The family night can be as simple as having the curriculum available to view and someone present to answer questions or a more formal presentation.
- Use the family night as a chance to engage parents and families as supportive partners: listen and learn what help parents/guardians may need in talking with their child about sex and relationships at home. Listen to their suggestions and encourage them to become part of the school sexual health committee. Be prepared to provide information or refer parents/guardians to trusted websites or programs for information on subjects such as talking with their child/ren or teens about sex, building healthy relationships, and effective communication.

DURING CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION:

- Provide information to families about the overall goals of the program – that children are healthy and safe and achieve academically, as well as prevent abuse, risky behaviors, unintended pregnancies and disease. Share what content and skills are being learned so parents/guardians know what is happening in the classroom and can be prepared for questions or to engage their child in conversation.
- Designate a person (the child's individual teacher or the program coordinator) for family members to contact with questions.
- Assess how family members felt about the curriculum after completion and how the program or program communication can be improved.
- Incorporate, where possible, homework assignments that engage parents and make sure that the parents are aware of these beforehand to promote family/child communication.

GENERAL ENGAGEMENT TIPS:

- Communicate with families through multiple channels—emails, mail, flyers in popular places, school newsletters, website, social media.
- Create and disseminate program materials and communication pieces that are clear and understandable. Don't use jargon or unexplained acronyms. Consider the needs of family members who do not speak English, have low literacy skills, or have visual or hearing impairments.
- Assure that all information is culturally appropriate.
- Boost attendance at events by:
 - Communicating the date and time early!
 - Using multiple channels (e.g., send invitations home with students, mail flyers directly to parents, call, post information on the school's website or Facebook page).
 - Providing childcare—and advertise that it is available.
 - Making it easy to attend your event: offer the session at a convenient time or better yet, multiple times, provide transportation if needed and easy parking.
 - Offering incentives: serve food, raffle off a small prize, give all attendees a gift or grocery store certificate, etc.
 - Hosting the event in conjunction with another event being held at the school (e.g., host your curriculum preview night on parent-teacher conference or open house night).
 - Ensuring your event marketing materials are inviting, welcoming and include messages that emphasize why it is worth their time to attend
 - Providing handouts online and/or posting a video of the event and to reach those who could not attend but still want the information.

FINDING ACTIVE FAMILY ADVOCATES:

In general, you want families to inform, understand and support your program. It is also may beneficial to have a small group of parents/guardians you can count on to not only support your program but also work actively for its implementation.

Some suggestions for finding advocates:

- Use your health teachers and other district champions to identify possible advocates.
- Pay attention to who shows up to learn about the program and who asks the really good questions. Approach them and see if they would like to get further involved.
- Learn about the organizations in the school find out who the leaders are. Reach out to them individually and discuss your program.
- Find out who the family members are who work in health fields (doctors, nurses, public health professionals, medical researchers). They already have a basic understanding of health and disease prevention and have credibility both as professionals and as parents.
- Seek out leaders from all segments of the community. Engage them and build their capacity to lead, support and advocate for the program.

Family engagement can take many forms and varied strategies can be successful in increasing parent involvement. Use these ideas and add your own based on the specifics of your community. For further background and assistance, check out these resources:

[Working with Parents of Teens.](#)

Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2012.

[Parent Engagement: Strategies for Involving Parents in School Health.](#)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012.

[Preventing Teen Pregnancy through Outreach and Engagement: Tips for Working with Parents.](#)

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, n.d.

[Parents' Sex Ed Center.](#)

Advocates for Youth, 2015.