Use of focus groups to develop an adolescent and community-driven obesity prevention program in an urban, multi-ethnic high school
A Description of the Focus Groups and Key Findings

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Statewide Agency Committed to Obesity Prevention

- Healthy Macdonough
  - Robert Wood Johnson Fdn. 1/1/06-4/30/07
  - Ecological: environmental and policy change

- Nutrition and Physical Activity Program
  - 2008-09: Testing 4-evidence based HEPA curricula in 4 Middletown elementary schools (DPH-funded)

- Food Smart and Fit
  - Office of Women’s Health 11/1/06-3/31/08
  - Chronic Care Model/Self-management goals

- Healthy Tomorrows
  - MCHB/AAP HT Partnership grant 2007-2012
  - Hybrid—Youth Leadership

- Living Smart Living Fit
  - HRSA 2008-2011
Healthy Tomorrows for Teens
LOOK GOOD--FEEL GOOD--DO GOOD!

• Five-year (2007-2012) program funded by the Maternal Child Health Bureau and American Academy of Pediatrics' Healthy Tomorrows Partnership program

• Target Population: Adolescent girls enrolled in New Britain high school (3129 students: CT’s largest hs)

• Portfolio of activities, including: nutritional counseling, YWCA fitness programs and community service learning and leadership projects
LOOK GOOD, FEEL GOOD, DO GOOD

LEADERSHIP BUILDING THROUGH SERVICE

• **Youth Development**: Emphasis on assets/leadership potential NOT problems

• **Service Learning**: Engaging youth in solving problems in their schools/communities, helping them see their questions in larger context of social justice/policy.

• **Community-Based Participatory Research**: Giving youth a role as co-researchers
Profile of NBHS Students (2007-08 DOE report)

- 71.8% minority
  - 52.3% Hispanic (predominately Puerto Rican)
  - 17.5% Black
  - 28.2% Caucasian (many Polish immigrants)
  - Over 40% of students from homes where English is not the primary language

- 47.7% eligible for free/reduced-price lunch
- 26.1% drop out rate (4X state avg. 6.2%)
- Teen pregnancy rate (2008): 17.7% overall; 26.5% for Latinas
- Statewide data show Latina teens more likely to be sexually active, have intercourse w/ 4 or more partners & initiate sex before age 13
Our Methodology

Focus groups as planning, intervention and evaluation tool

- Focus groups fostered leadership; gave teens a voice in how HT evolved
- 42 teens and parents participated in five focus groups from 05/07-08/08, facilitated by University of Connecticut faculty- at the school, YWCA and a Latino community agency.
Focus Group 1: Early Planning: May 2007

• 9 teen girls recruited via SBHC
• Purpose
  – Body image
  – Barriers to physical activity/good nutrition
  – Program input
Focus Group 1:

• Cultural Differences shape attitudes about body image and weight: “thick”, “full-bodied is norm in community.

• Girls perceive eating as less an issue than exercise. “Laziness” is a problem; also medical concerns.

• PE classes were a barrier rather than facilitator of activity. Girls “hate” being forced to run.

• Enthusiasm expressed about a new program but no overt emphasis on health.
How we used findings:

- Offer a flexible “portfolio” of fun activities
- Combine group activities with individual interventions
- Adapted our strategy—including content in workshops/activities girls defined
- Expanded partnership with the YWCA of New Britain: decision to provide FREE memberships for all (not an incentive)
- Obtained approval from NBHS guidance for HT to satisfy community service requirement
- Emphasis on peer support.
Focus Group Two: Early Evaluation and Expansion

- Held at YWCA of New Britain - end of year celebration, yoga & food
- 15 girls who had participated in HT activities during the year & had become program leaders “Ambassadors”

- Purpose
  - Feedback & evaluation
  - Generate new ideas, especially for leadership component
Focus Group 2:

• Girls liked & wanted to repeat activities.
• Liked activities with a “purpose” (e.g., breast CA walk)
• Program not marketed well- few knew about free Y memberships
• Timing & transportation were big barriers
• External influences on body image in school (as opposed to community) are media ideas. Self-confidence is important but these are reality.
• Would be comfortable in leadership role.
Focus Group 2:

• Add summer Ambassadors (leadership) program
• Planned for girls to market the program in school in Fall 08
• Expanded partnership with YWCA
  – fitness coordinator
  – began mentoring middle school girls
Focus Group 3: Partnership Building:

- Spanish Speaking Center: NEW partner
- 18 Latino participants
- Purpose
  - Gather input from parents and participants
  - Community Outreach
  - Recruit parents for HTs

Wednesday, December 16, 2009
Focus Group 3:

• Lack of awareness of program, but a great interest in HTs-especially Y membership
• Parents expressed interest in becoming members of the Advisory Board.
• Parents of older adolescents very concerned about loss of insurance coverage for children over age 18.
  – Frustration and fear expressed. Confusion about eligibility and application for continuation of coverage.
Focus Group3: How we used the findings

- Expand the partnership with the Spanish Speaking Center.
  - Help with marketing the program and engaging parents of participants.
- Partner with local pediatricians to foster referrals.

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Review of Literature:  Putting our findings in context

Use of focus group methodology:

• Increase provider understanding of body image, attitudes/barriers to PA/healthy eating among teens/adults

• Advance understanding in the field and at formative stage of project development (planning)

• Evaluate programs and as an intervention/leadership development strategy is less common.

  – Horowitz et al “A Model for Using Community-Based Participatory Research to Address the Diabetes Epidemic in East Harlem.”
Our Findings Supported by the Literature

Research shows that teens have:

- Complex, contradictory attitudes about weight

- Sophistication about cultural context & possible solutions: good leadership potential but essential knowledge about nutrition is low (Ambassadors program + education from RD)

- Need for autonomy: (a “portfolio”)

- Preference for programs that give social support and access to PA venues (partnership with YWCA)

- Common barriers: lack of time & transportation & perception that neighborhoods are unsafe (work with school to change bus route)
Incorporating the Findings to Modify or Expand Program Strategies and Interventions

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MS, RD, CDE, CD-N
How do we help teens adopt healthier behaviors?

- Healthy diet
- Exercise
- Health behaviors
- Leadership
Our Original Plan

• Offer a 6-week nutrition workshop, FoodSmart and Fit modeled after a successful program developed for a program funded by Office on Women’s Health.

• Each Session:
  – Educational component
  – A physical activity component
  – Weigh-In
  – Goal setting/action plan
  – Self-report action plan/problem solving
Adapting our Nutrition Program FoodSmart and Fit

• Offer “stand alone” workshops once a month, not once a week.
• Recruit
  – Partner with favorite teachers
  – Email, My Space
  – Snail mail
• Don’t expect instant success
• Use of FoodSmart and Fit for feedback and adjustment of program
Other key FSF

- Reiterate take-home points
- Limit your key messages
- Include a fun activity: zumba
- Offer food...healthy food choices!!!!
- Incentives

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Incorporating Self-Management Goal Setting into

• We don’t want to be their Mom!

• “Now honey...eat your brussel sprouts. They are good for you.”
However, just like parents, providers impart well-

- Melissa, you really should lose some weight.
- Cherina, I want you to stop drinking soda and avoid fast foods.
- Azara, why don’t you walk every night for 30 minutes? It will help you to lose weight.
And what happens?

Melissa

Cherina

Azara
Self Management -

Traditional patient education focused on acquisition of knowledge

Research shows programs lead to improved knowledge but not improved outcomes*

Examples: education sessions, lectures, groups, handouts

• Norris et al Diabetes Care 2001, 24 (3) 561
How do we foster Self-Management in the teen

• Requires patient-centered goal setting
• “Coach” helps patients identify goals they are confident they can achieve now
• Achieving the goal is more important than the nature of the goal
• Promote self efficacy
Moving Forward
Health Class Survey-

• Partnered with the University of Connecticut

• Students self-reported information
  – weight, height
  – developmentally relevant health behaviors
  – nutrition knowledge
  – body image
  – influences on health behaviors
Barriers to Healthy Lifestyles for Latinas at NBHS: 9th Grade Survey

• 561 students completed U-Conn survey on eating/PA activities in May 2008: 117 were Latina females
• Latinas more likely to be dissatisfied with weight compared to African American & white peers
• Latinas most likely to be obese: 18% vs. 9% of African American & 0% of whites
• Latinas least likely to be physically active
  – 21% never get dressed for gym vs. 7.5% of African Americans
  – 54% failed gym/health at least once compared to 19% of whites
  – 33% involved in team sport vs. 51% of whites
Weight related behaviors - Eating behaviors

Juice/tea

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Soda

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<td>6%</td>
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<td>Did not drink in past 7 days</td>
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</table>
Weight related behaviors - Eating behaviors

Days/week skip breakfast *

Days/week eat dinner with family

*AA adolescents more often skip breakfast (F=2.7, p=.05)

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Next Steps: Focus group questions arising from grade 9 survey results

• How to increase health behaviors without promoting negative body image?
• What types of physical activities would be enjoyable/acceptable given cultural and developmental preferences?
• How to make gym class more acceptable?
• Continue to work with the students to identify the best ways to communicate nutritional information to this audience.
Salud America! The RWJF Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children

- National program of Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: direction & technical assistance from Institute for Health Promotion Research at University of Texas San Antonio

- 20 grantees in U.S. in learning community

- Research objective: Use Community participatory processes that encourage Latino teens & families to discuss their needs and define action strategies to address childhood obesity.

- Focus groups and interviews, innovative CBPR approaches (Photovoices)
A Mid-course Evaluation:

-Latinas are attracted to Healthy Tomorrows and give high ratings to all activities but that has not translated into consistent participation and engagement.

- A primary purpose of the Salud America evaluation is to understand and overcome barriers to consistent engagement by Latina teens and increase their level of physical activity.

- Provide partners (YWCA, NB High School, NB Spanish Speaking Center) with useful information that they can apply to performance improvements within and collaborations between their organizations.
Conclusions/Lessons

• **Focus Groups:**
  - Provide valuable insights into teen preferences for preventive care and medical home.
  - Build trust and foster leadership skills.
  - Forge new community partnerships and recruit parents.
  - Provide a comfortable forum.
  - Don’t have to be a one time event!
Conclusions/Lessons Learned

• Be patient. Don’t expect overnight success.
• Leadership styles differ.
• Partner with respected faculty members who can help to promote your message.
• Offer a portfolio of options rather than a single intervention; be flexible in adding new programs (and dropping ones that don’t work).
• Cultivate a small group of adolescent leaders.
• Let teens grow the program by marketing it to peers.
Thank you.  
Your questions?

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