

Project T.R.U.S.T. Peer Education Presentation to Japanese Teens in the United States

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ABSTRACT

A teen peer sexuality education program, Project T.R.U.S.T. (Teaching Responsibility and Understanding of Sexuality and Teen Development) was developed and launched in 2000 by teens and staff at a sexual health care clinic in the United States. As part of a larger exploratory study, Project T.R.U.S.T. teen peer educators presented on communication and healthy and unhealthy dating relationships to a small audience of 11 Japanese teens in the US. This report includes a description of Project T.R.U.S.T. and the presentation made to the Japanese teens. It concludes with reflections on the potential usefulness of adapting a teen peer education program for use with Japanese teens.

Home Economics teachers in Japan and Family and Consumer Sciences teachers in the US share similar challenges in responding to the sexuality education needs of teens. Local school boards and parents may choose to restrict the topics discussed in classrooms; teachers may need additional training in how to address complex situations faced by teens; and other course-required topics may limit the amount of time for sexuality education.

Meanwhile, teens are engaging in sexual intercourse at an earlier age than two decades ago, and a sizeable minority, nearly 40% in both countries, of sexually-active teens report using condoms inconsistently (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008; Watanabe, 2007). Teens obtain information about sex and relationships from peers, friends, parents, and the media; and some of this information can be incorrect (Brown, Keller, & Stern, 2009).

Training peers to deliver sexuality education has been used in both countries. In Japan, college students have offered peer education and counseling to high school students (Takamura, 2005; Tsurugi, 2006). In the US, peer educators have offered sexuality education to other teens (Caron, Godin, Otis & Lambert, 2004).

Studies of peer education programs in the US indicate peer norms influence the process of sexual initiation and condom use. However, few programs have been evaluated for the impact on young audiences. In their review of studies of peer education, Caron, Godin, Otis, and Lambert (2004) noted that it may influence short-term positive change in attitude, self-efficiency and behavioral intention

regarding condom use; attitude towards abstinence; self-efficiency to refuse sex; more conservative sexual norms; a delay in the initiation of sexual behaviors; a reduction in the frequency of intercourse; and an increase in the use of condoms among sexually active teens. Programs demonstrating positive evaluation outcomes tend to be theory-based, highly structured, and led by well-trained peers.

A Teen Peer Education Program

In the US, state autonomy allows each state to set its own regulations regarding sexuality education in public schools. During the time Project T.R.U.S.T. was developed, states were unable to obtain federal money to fund comprehensive sexuality education programs.

The state of Michigan requires schools to teach the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS and allows schools to choose to provide sexuality education classes that cover family planning, and human sexuality. Teachers who are not licensed as a health care professional but who teach STIs/HIV education are required to be trained by the state's Department of Education to teach this topic. Teachers who teach family planning and human sexuality are also required to meet state qualifications to teach health education.

In 1999, the agency Planned Parenthood of South Central Michigan (PPSCM) began researching best practices in teen pregnancy prevention and convened a group of teens to serve as a focus group to assess community needs. Both local teens and the research review indicated a peer education program could be an effective approach to encourage teens to build responsible decision-making skills. As a result, Project T.R.U.S.T. was launched in 2000 in one Michigan county with one of the highest teen pregnancy rates per capita in the state and a higher rate of teen pregnancies and births than national averages (Michigan League for Human Services, 2000). In the first year of the program the teens named the program Project T.R.U.S.T. (Seitz & Maine, 2003). At the time the local public school district had an abstinence-only curriculum, but it was changed in 2004 to a more comprehensive sexuality education model that includes content on contraceptives.

The primary goal of Project T.R.U.S.T. is to train teens in leadership, life skills and responsible choices with the aim to reduce teen pregnancy. Project T.R.U.S.T. fits the agency's mission to empower strength-based and positive youth-adult partnerships, collaborations, and activism (Seitz, 2009). PPSCM staff recruits, screens, and then trains 6-8 teen peer educators each year. The peer educators receive "comprehensive sexuality education and learn practical leadership and life skills, and educational strategies to promote responsible choices and teen pregnancy prevention in their communities through peer education activities" (Seitz & Maine, 2003, p. 5). Parents of the peer educators give permission and attend a program orientation where they have access to all of the information their teens will learn and present.

Teens selected as peer educators participate in 40 hours of training in comprehensive sexuality education (e.g., abstinence, body image, communication, relationships, self-esteem, decision-making, birth control, STIs, and physiology). Teens must pass knowledge tests with a high score and demonstrate exceptional presentation skills in order to be certified by PPSCM.

Trained and certified peer educators offer presentations, workshops, rap-sessions, and house parties; and talk one-on-one with interested teens and adults and with those who stop by Project T.R.U.S.T. displays at community events or attend a teen clinic held at the PPSCM offices. During their term, peer educators continue to meet weekly for three hours with PPSCM staff in order to plan presentations, practice, and advise PPSCM staff about youth concerns (Seitz & Maine, 2003).

The Project T.R.U.S.T. peer educators tailor presentations to the group requesting a presentation. Topics requested include communication, healthy relationships, condom use, birth control, STIs, and issues faced by teens. Peer educators have presented at community events, for non-profit and religious organizations, and in college courses on adolescence and human sexuality and in public schools if invited by a student club.

A presentation is typically 60 minutes in length. Regardless of topics requested, teen peer educators emphasize the importance of communication between teens and parents and/or trusted adults, and between teens and friends/partners; such communication about healthy sexuality is associated with lower levels of risky sexual behavior among teens (Guilamo-Ramos & Bouris, 2009; Halpern-Felsher, Kropp, Boyer, Tschann, & Ellen, 2004).

As part of her master's degree program, the first author, with the assistance of the remaining authors including the second author who developed Project T.R.U.S.T., conducted an exploratory study of Project T.R.U.S.T. presentations with adults and teens. The goal of the study was twofold: to obtain audience reactions to Project T.R.U.S.T. presentations; and to offer the first author the opportunity to understand Project T.R.U.S.T. to determine whether aspects of it would be appropriate for teens in Japan. This report addresses the second goal by summarizing the content included in the presentation to the Japanese teens and offering reflections about the appropriateness of teen peer education for Japanese teens. These reflections are based on comments gathered in a feedback questionnaire distributed after the presentation, the first author's observations of presentations and the peer educators' training, and discussion about these comments and observations with the co-authors.

Project T.R.U.S.T. Presentations

During 2008, Project T.R.U.S.T. teen peer educators completed presentations to three groups of adults and three groups of teens (i.e., an experiential learning group for girls, a high school classroom, and classes from a Saturday school for Japanese teens living in the US for a few years because of their parents' jobs).

The presentations to the Japanese teens were 45 rather than 60 minutes due to limited time available in the class schedule. The presentation began with introductions and an ice-breaker activity, and continued with a focus on unhealthy and healthy relationships, and the importance of communication with dating partners and with family members or trusted adults. The Project T.R.U.S.T. adult staff member and the teen peer educators together asked the teens to consider general questions (e.g., what is an unhealthy relationships?) and specific questions (e.g., did you ever experience this, or have you had a significant relationship?). Teens answered the general questions in English but talked with one another in Japanese when the question was more personal. Peer educators did not cover birth control or STIs.

Unhealthy relationships were defined as including physical or verbal abuse, or threat of abuse. In unhealthy relationships one or both partners may cheat, lie, be disrespectful or rude. One partner becomes too dependent on the other for happiness, is exploited, taken advantage of, forced to do something she or he does not want to do, or pressured to have sex. An unhealthy relationship is one in which a person does not feel as though he or she can express true feelings, is clingy, cannot do activities alone, or tries to keep the other from doing activities.

Healthy relationships were defined as consensual and based on mutual decision-making, commitment, loyalty, understanding, love, and friendship. A balance between the need for independence and dependence, and between giving and receiving exists. Partners are honest,

supportive, forgiving, and compassionate with one another. They communicate well are considerate, and do not pressure one another. They have fun together.

The group of teens were asked to determine if examples (e.g., you feel good about yourself when around the person, your dating partner makes jokes about you that hurt your feelings) were healthy or unhealthy. Throughout the presentation, teens were reminded not to compromise their values when dating.

Peer educators also encouraged teens to talk with family members and/or trusted adults about values and relationships. The assumption is the more teens understand their family's expectations and values, the more likely teens will be to adopt similar values. The more teens talk with family members or trusted adults about relationships, the more likely someone will recognize unhealthy behaviors or troublesome situations being faced by the teen. The peer educators also explained that in the US the legal age of consent to sex varies across states. In Michigan the legal age of consent is age 16.

Immediately following the presentation, peer educators invited the teens to complete a feedback questionnaire in English, "Tell Us What You Think," designed to collect self-report data on knowledge, attitudes, and intended behavior change. Questions addressed participants' intent to engage in certain behaviors as a result of attending a Project T.R.U.S.T. presentation.

Participants were asked the following questions. How likely are you to do each of the following after attending this Project T.R.U.S.T. presentation? Talk with your friends about healthy sexual decision-making? Talk with a parent or trusted adult about healthy decision-making? Talk with a person you are dating about: whether or not to become sexually active, the potential outcomes of sexual activity, abstinence, contraception, and getting tested for HIV or sexually transmitted infections? Make the choice to delay or limit your sexual activity? Make the choice to use condoms if you are sexually active? Responses to these items were: more likely, as likely, less likely, unsure, or not applicable. The questionnaire included space for teens to write comments about what they liked, suggested improvements, and information from the presentation they were likely to share.

Responses

All 11 Japanese teens submitted an immediate feedback questionnaire. The mean age of Japanese teens was 15.6 years ($SD=1.43$), with a range from 14 to 18. Nine Japanese teens were female and 2 were male. A few teens answered how likely they were to talk with a parent or trusted adult about healthy decision-making ($n=4$, 36.4%), how likely they were to talk with a person they were dating about abstinence ($n=3$, 27.3%), contraception ($n=1$, 9.9%), or getting tested for HIV or STIs ($n=3$, 27.3%) or how likely they were to make the choice to use condoms if sexually active ($n=5$, 45.4%). Over half ($n=6$, 54.5%) answered the likelihood of talking with a dating partner about becoming sexually active and the potential outcomes of sexual activity.

In response to the open-ended questions, 6 of the 11 participants (54%) wrote comments. Five indicated the content was good and/or no improvements were needed. One teen suggested: "*Everything was good but...explain more about friendship because most teenagers have problems with friendships.*"

Four of the six participants who wrote comments reported liking information on how to be in relationships and being honest with oneself. "*I liked that to be in a relationship the time frame doesn't matter. We should be honest [with] ourselves.*" One teen added, "*I liked that people of my age did the presentation because it made me feel closer to the [topic].*"

Three of those who wrote comments indicated that they would share information about communication in relationships and being honest with oneself with other teens.

Reflections

Few participants and a large number of unanswered questions do not allow analysis of responses. It is important to note that discussion occurring among the teens while they were responding to the post-program questionnaire suggests that some believed the questions were too personal to answer. Also, although teens reported to their teachers that they understood the questionnaire in English, it still may have been confusing to them, so if they did answer questions they may have chosen to answer according to their beliefs, irrespective of the influence of the presentation.

Based on observations of presentations and training, study of the Project T.R.U.S.T. training manual, and discussion of observations and data from feedback questionnaires, the remainder of this discussion will focus on the first author's reflections on the aspects of Project T.R.U.S.T. that may be relevant to a Japanese teen audience and changes needed for this program to be more culturally relevant and appropriate. These reflections also are informed by the first author's experience being a teacher at a Japanese Saturday school in the US, and having taught Home Economics in junior high school and high school in Japan for 12 years.

First, Japanese teens who attended the Project T.R.U.S.T. presentation voiced strong interest in healthy dating relationships and how to communicate in these relationships. They found relevant examples of healthy and unhealthy relationships as experienced and described by peer educators. They appreciated hearing that they do not have to endure unhealthy relationships. They wanted to learn more about these topics and to have the opportunity to discuss them. Covering healthy and unhealthy relationships and how to communicate in a dating relationship may be important topics to address with teens, and teens may listen more intently when the information comes from teen peer educators.

Second, teen peer educators may offer a means to augment the teaching about human sexuality that already occurs in schools in Japan. Some teachers may not have the expertise in or the time to prepare materials to teach about sexuality. Well-trained and supervised peer educators may be a way to offer teens access to information and to recruit and nurture the next generation of sexuality educators.

Third, Ito and Kimura (1999) reported that the majority of parents in their study from Tokyo and the Chiba prefecture wanted their children to learn about healthy relationships as part of the topic of parenting when taught in home economics. The majority of the parents also thought it was important for teenagers to learn how to respect each other and how to build good relationships before marrying. However, national teaching guidelines in home economics do not provide details about relationships during adolescence (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science Technology, 2009). The training manual for Project T.R.U.S.T. provides concrete teaching materials on developing healthy relationships during adolescence and may offer teachers ideas on how to incorporate this topic into content on parenting.

Project T.R.U.S.T. peer educators are trained to present on communication about sexuality to both teens and adults. Parents in Japan may find peer educators' suggestions about how to talk with their teens about sexuality useful. Likewise, teens may benefit from hearing from other teens how to improve communication with parents.

When considering what, if any, aspects of Project T.R.U.S.T. may be useful for a Japanese audience, it is important to recognize that this program was developed by a not-for-profit community-based agency. In Japan, there are not enough community agencies to serve all teens. Therefore, public schools provide a more reasonable location for teen peer sexuality education in Japan. To accomplish

a peer education program may require collaboration with school nurses and counselors, community health centers, and universities.

Also, given the centrality of parenting and relationship development in the Home Economics curriculum in Japan, discussing sexuality in Home Economics classes makes sense. Discussing sexuality through topics such as communication skills, decision-making, developing a positive sense of self, respecting oneself and others, and building trust in relationships may provide teens access to important ideas and skills not addressed elsewhere in their education.

To build comfort among teens, multiple presentations by the same peer educators may be important. It also may be important that peer educators present where they attend school.

If a teen peer education program were to be pilot-tested in Japan, evaluations of peer education training and the subsequent presentations made by peer educators are recommended. Given the low rate of response to the questions noted above, an evaluation may benefit from input from peer educators who could help to design questions teens would be more comfortable answering.

These reflections are offered to encourage mutual dialogue between teachers and educators in Japan and in the US. Sharing ideas can benefit both as they seek to educate the next generation in healthy communication, relationships, and sexual decision-making.

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