

The role of youth engagement in program implementation and youth outcomes

Jen Walzer, MPH

June 25-27, 2024

**2024WARD: Building Brighter Futures for
Today's Youth Leaders**

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families (ACYF), Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program Grantee Conference



The views expressed in written training materials, publications, or presentations by speakers and moderators do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Department of Health and Human Services; nor does mention of trade names, commercial practices, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

The work described in this presentation was supported by the Office of Population Affairs and under contract number HHSP233201500035I/75P00120F37051.



Components that predict youth engagement in a TPP program



Agenda

- / Research questions and data sources**
- / Program components most influential in predicting youth engagement**
- / Engagement as a predictor of youth outcomes improvement**
- / Summary and implications**
- / Forum wrap up**



Motivation

- / Benefits of TPP programs on youth outcomes has been demonstrated across several studies**
- / However, it is not enough for youth to be offered or to attend the delivery of the program; they also need to become engaged with the content and activities of the program (Larson 2000; Vandell et al. 2005)**
- / Engagement can be measured and is sensitive to change, allowing us to explore which program components predict more or less engagement**



Questions answered today

/ **How reliable and valid are different measures of engagement?**

- Which measures did we rely on for the analysis?

/ **Which components predict engagement?**

- Dosage?
- Content?
- Activities and formats?

/ **Does engagement predict outcomes at immediate follow-up?**

- Which outcomes improved based on whether youth were engaged?



Youth engagement specific data sources and methods overview



Data sources

/ Measures of engagement

- Youth exit tickets, facilitator logs, observations, youth surveys, youth focus groups

/ Youth outcomes

- Youth post-survey

/ Covariates: youth, facilitator, school characteristics

- Youth pre-survey, facilitator and school staff interviews

/ Program components

- Components checklist
- Facilitator logs



Key data source: Youth exit ticket

Aggregate engagement = Average of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral (Items 1-4)

For each of the following, please answer based on your experience with today's lesson.

		Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Mostly	A great deal	
Emotional	→	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	
Cognitive	→	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	
Behavioral	→	3. I tried hard during the lesson	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○
		4. I paid attention during the lesson	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○
Uptake	→	5. Today's lesson is going to help me deal with important issues in my life in the next few years	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○

Developed by Frensley et al. 2020



Methods

/ Descriptives/correlations

/ Use components to predict engagement

- Examined how components offered on a given day predicted engagement that day
- Ran separate regressions for each set of predictors (dosage, content, activities and formats)

/ Use engagement to predict outcomes

- Examined how engagement predicts changes in youth outcomes over time (pre-post survey)

/ Qualitative data analysis



Which is the best measure of youth engagement?



Youth exit tickets are the best source

- / Youth measures from survey and exit tickets are well correlated with each other**
 - Youth surveys only capture engagement at the end of programming
 - Youth exit tickets are available after each class session
- / Youth exit tickets capture all three dimensions of engagement**
- / Observers detect behavioral engagement only**
 - Only available for subset of data
- / Facilitators do not seem to be a reliable source**
 - Not correlated with any other sources or measures



Which Components Predict Youth Engagement?



Dosage findings

/ Overall dosage did not predict engagement

- Dosage was measured in the minutes of REA programming that a student received
- Engagement for this analysis was aggregated at the S&S level using the Exit Ticket

/ Engagement was significantly higher during later program sessions

- Each increase in the session number showed a significant increase in engagement

The first two days are slower. It takes time to build trust. And then the students, as they go along, seem happier.

—REA facilitator

Once I got more comfortable, I got more motivated [to participate in activities].

—Focus group participant



Content findings

- / We examined 35 content components, grouped into seven higher-level content sub-types**
 - Academic success, emotional health, individual values, sexuality, sexual behavior, social health, and substance use
- / Two of the seven content sub-types were significant predictors of engagement**
 - Sessions with more emotional health and sexual behavior content predicted lower engagement relative to the other topic areas



Qualitative insight: youth focus groups

/ **Overall: Youth liked the content**

/ **Positive reactions to relationship topics that are applicable to current life and relationships**

- This content weaves throughout REA lessons

/ **Mixed reactions to sexual health content, driven by whether information was “new”**

- Half of schools offered some other TPP/sexual health programming

[The facilitator] hit everything in detail. They did great, but I wish they dove more into the...sexual conversation...Outside of school, certain households don't have that conversation, and that awareness is important. Everyone should know.
—Focus group participant

We didn't like the sexual health one—we've all heard it. It was a lot of repetition from what I've been hearing since 5th grade.—Focus group participant



Activity and format findings

- / **Relatively few activity components were significantly associated with engagement**
- / **Those that encouraged interaction between youth and made content relevant through demonstrations were associated with higher engagement**
 - Aggregate: Norm-setting (introductions) predicted less engagement
 - Individual: Role-play and demonstrations predicted more engagement
- / **No format components were significant predictors of engagement**



Interactive activities include interactive delivery methods such as discussions, games, or role-playing.



Home-based activities include activities intended to be completed outside of the implementation setting.



Norm-setting activities include introducing and establishing group norms, such as through icebreaker activities.



Passive multimedia activities include viewing or listening to pictures, videos, audio, or social media.



Passive traditional activities include viewing or listening to readings, experiments, or didactic lessons.



Formats include small group discussions, large-group discussions and independent activities.



Another lens for activities: facilitator teaching strategies

- / **Facilitation strategies were self-reported by facilitators in the log**
- / **Facilitation strategies that incorporated interaction with peers predicted overall engagement**
 - **More frequent use of “Pair and share” predicted higher engagement**
- / **Most strategies were not significant**
 - Not associate with engagement: Icebreaker, Use names, Share examples, Incentives, Energy, Open-ended questions, Circulate the room, Other





Qualitative insights: youth focus groups and facilitator feedback

I would break up a lesson with an icebreaker for a brain break to re-engage students. Sometimes, a pair share would be enough to get students re-energized.

—REA facilitator

I liked the hands-on, social part of it. One time we had a paper, and we had to go around and say if we had a common interest with other people. I liked that.

I liked that one too. I got to learn more about the people in my class.

—Focus group participants

We felt that we could trust her, because after the lessons were over, she would talk about other things related to the topic, she didn't feel like a teacher but more like a friend.

—Focus group participant

Every time you answered a question, you got a sucker [lollipop]...One day they brought donuts, and on the last day when the questions were more difficult, they gave out T-shirts. The treats made us more attentive because you just want a donut.

—Focus group participant



Does youth engagement predict youth outcomes?



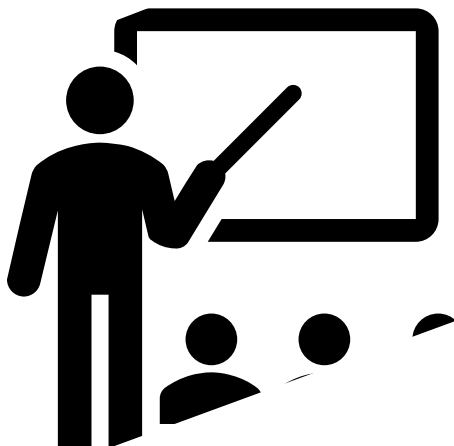
High youth engagement is a strong predictor of favorable outcomes

- / Statistically significant predictor for 24 of the 36 proximal outcomes**
 - For 23 of the outcomes, higher levels of engagement was associated with more favorable outcomes
- / Average standardized outcome change of .15 standard deviation units (SD), ranged from -.09 to .25 SD**



Overall findings – Summary

- / Youth exit ticket is a valid and reliable measure of youth engagement**
- / Our components analysis showed that engagement grew over the course of the program and was higher when youth had opportunities to interact with their peers about program content**
- / Finally, our outcomes analysis found that youth engagement significantly predicted outcome improvement**





Limitations

/ Findings not causal

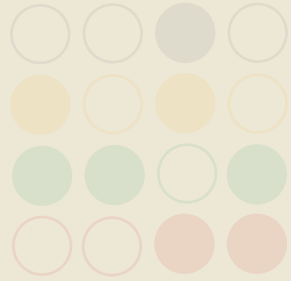
/ Short timeframe (~1 month) may underestimate change

/ S&S variation of certain components limited



Implications for programs and evaluation

- / Engagement matters for youth outcomes—but it is not constant**
- / Daily exit tickets may be an optimal strategy for monitoring how engagement varies over time and what contributes to the variation**
- / This strategy may help program staff and researchers with continuous quality improvement efforts**



Zooming out





Summary across presentations



We didn't find a "secret ingredient" to program success - instead, we found a handful of components that are likely more important than others for specific outcomes or program goals.



Youth connection with facilitator is important, connected to why youth engaged.



How might you all apply this in your work?

/ **Program developers:**

- Use the program component checklist to create transparency about program features and/or to create guidance for implementors on adaptations
- Choose outcomes to improve, identify which components drive those outcomes

/ **Program providers and implementors:**

- Use the program component checklist to show how planned implementation aligns with expectations from program developer
- Collect data from daily exit tickets, paired with the checklist, to understand what is engaging youth



- *Daily exit tickets may be an optimal strategy for future studies to consider when measuring engagement.*
- *Programs should consider sequencing lessons (prioritizing core lessons at the end of the program, when youth are likely to be most engaged) and choosing appropriate interactive activities that increase youth engagement*
- *Youth engagement is a necessary condition for outcome improvement.*

Thank you!

Jen Walzer

jwalzer@mathematica-mpr.com

Session Evaluation

Please complete a brief evaluation form for all workshop, forum and networking sessions by scanning the following QR code or visiting the following link:

<https://bit.ly/2024Evaluations>





References

Frensley, B., M. Stern, and R. Powell. “Does Student Enthusiasm Equal Learning? The Mismatch Between Observed and Self-Reported Student Engagement and Environmental Literacy Outcomes in a Residential Setting.” *The Journal of Environmental Education*, vol. 51, no. 6, 2020, pp. 449–461. doi: 10.1080/00958964.2020.1727404.

Larson, R. “Toward a Psychology of Positive Youth Development.” *American Psychologist*, vol. 55, 2000, pp. 170–183.

Vandell, D. L., D. J. Shernoff, K. M. Pierce, D. M. Bolt, K. Dadisman, and B. B Brown. “Activities, Engagement, and Emotion in After-School Programs (and Elsewhere).” *New Directions for Youth Development*, vol. 105, 2005, pp. 121–129. doi: 10.1002/yd.111.



Appendix slides



Content component categories

/ The 54 individual content components were aggregated into seven categories:

- **Academic success content** (4) addresses youth's options and plans for pathways to academic success.
- **Emotional health content** (10) addresses intrapersonal processes and strengths.
- **Individual values content** (4) addresses youths' personal identity and belief systems.
- **Sexual behavior content** (13) includes content that addresses the physical behaviors related to sexual activity, its preconditions (such as puberty), and its potential consequences (such as pregnancy).
- **Sexuality content** (7) addresses the non-physical behaviors and experiences related to healthy sexual behavior, its preconditions (such as consent), and its potential consequences (such as healthy relationships).
- **Social health content** (12) addresses interpersonal skills, relationships, and belief systems.
- **Substance use content** (4) addresses the avoidance of, reduction of, and risks related to using substances.



Activity component categories

/ **The 19 individual activity components were aggregated into five categories:**

- **Interactive activities** (8) include interactive delivery methods such as discussions, games, or role playing.
- **Home-based activities** (2) include activities intended to be completed outside of the implementation setting.
- **Norm-setting activities** (1) include introducing and establishing group norms or program goals, such as through icebreaker activities.
- **Passive multimedia activities** (4) include viewing or listening to pictures, videos, audio, or social media.
- **Passive traditional activities** (4) include viewing or listening to readings, experiments, or didactic lessons.



Youth post survey measures of engagement

Construct	Measure
Experiences with the program	<p>The next questions are about your experiences with the REAL Essentials program. Even if you didn't attend all of the sessions or classes in this program, how often during REAL Essentials [FILL A-E]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. Did you feel interested in program sessions and classes?B. Did you feel the material presented was clear?C. Did discussions or activities help you to learn program lessons?D. Did you have a chance to ask questions about topics or issues that came up in the program?E. Did you feel respected as a person? <p>Response scale: (1) None of the time to (5) All of the time Source: Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) Performance Measures, available upon request from Mathematica.</p>
Uptake	<p>How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? I am starting to see opportunities to apply the ideas from REAL Essentials in my life.</p> <p>Response scale: (1) Strongly disagree to (5) Strongly agree Source: Mathematica developed.</p>



Facilitator- and observer-reported measures of engagement

Construct	Measure
Engagement	<p>On a scale of 1 to 5, how engaged were the students in this lesson?</p> <p>Select best option:</p> <p>1- Students appeared consistently inattentive, distracted, uninterested, apathetic, and/or uncooperative during this activity or with the content in this lesson; students consistently had off-topic side conversations</p> <p>2- <i>no category description provided</i></p> <p>3- Students' levels of interest, attentiveness, or cooperation varied during the activity; students were somewhat attentive and generally cooperative but did not ask questions, had trouble listening and responding to the facilitator, or were easily distracted; some students were using cell phones, reading, talking, etc.; some students had off-topic side conversations</p> <p>4- <i>no category description provided</i></p> <p>5- Students appeared consistently interested in the activity, asked questions, responded to facilitator's questions and directions; students were not using their cell phones, talking, passing notes, or reading</p> <p>Source: Mathematica developed based on measure used on the Federal Evaluation of <i>Making Proud Choices!</i></p>