FYSB Family & Youth
Services Bureau

Recruitment and Retention

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Recruiting and retaining youth is critical to the success of adolescent pregnancy prevention programs. A well-designed recruitment plan helps identify and attract eligible youth in the population to be served, while pre-planned retention steps help reduce participant attrition. Developing and executing a recruitment and retention plan takes forethought, diligence, and creativity. This resource guide describes factors to consider when developing a recruitment and retention plan to increase programmatic success. Overall, it is critical to ensure your PREP programming is a high-quality experience for participants. A high-quality program experience will help with retention throughout the program and future program recruitment.

TIPS FOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

- Understand your target audience
- Identify and minimize barriers and competition to participation and retention
- Establish a solid partnership with each school or other implementation site
- Demonstrate the importance of program implementation
- Be creative and inclusive in your recruitment and curricula materials, especially through user-led designs
- Promote collaborative referrals and build your organizational presence in the community
- Support staff to develop positive, respectful and supportive relationships with youth in the program
- Offer youth empowering opportunities
- Provide incentives

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Understand your target audience

A strong recruitment and retention plan involves knowing your target audience and how to reach them, creating a sense of community, and fostering a safe environment. This can be achieved by hiring well-trained staff members who share values and characteristics and, when possible, have prior experience working with your target population. This may increase stakeholder and parent buy-in and trust, especially when working with priority populations (e.g., youth in foster care, adjudicated youth, Native youth) (Dickerson et al., 2021). Develop a strategy to solicit ongoing feedback from youth and parents and use their feedback to develop and improve your program. This could lead to an increase in recruitment rates and buy-in and satisfaction with your project and strengthen overall retention (Armistead et al., 2004). When possible, host parent nights to address questions regarding your program and to highlight student knowledge and successes.

Identify and minimize barriers and competition to participation and retention

In an effort to understand what might keep youth from participating in your program, it is important to understand what else is competing with their time and attention. Barriers to participant recruitment may include competing responsibilities, scheduling issues, lack of information or interest, and lack of transportation (D'Agostino & Visser, 2010). From a health equity perspective, some youth may be more likely than others to have barriers such as caring for younger siblings, working 20 hours or more each week, or needing to reduce after school activities to focus on academics (Serido et al., 2014). Consistent meeting/event schedules and facilitators might help encourage youth to include attending the program in their schedules. Challenges in retaining participants are similar to those of recruitment. When possible, reduce length or stagger frequency or implementation mode of program activities while maintaining fidelity. Consider offering the program on weekdays and weekends and work with youth to offset any challenges they might face in getting to the program (e.g., offer bus tokens) (Dickerson et. al., 2021).

RESOURCE

» **Podcast Episode:**
Navigating the New Norm

Consider using collaborative engagement techniques, such as journey mapping, to gain youth perspectives on addressing recruitment and retention barriers, program improvement, and how to put their needs at the center of your efforts (Behrmann et. al., 2022). These types of techniques can help programs identify non-traditional or invisible barriers that they have not had an opportunity to address previously. Note that these efforts should include learning from youth who already participate in the program, youth who have had to drop out of the program, and youth who are interested but unable to attend.

Establish a solid partnership with each school or other implementation site

Retention rates are often higher in school-based programs where youth have fewer transportation constraints and where programming is structured into the school schedule (Lafferty & McIntosh, 2021). With increasing demands on schools, be realistic about what is needed to implement your programs successfully, especially during the school day. Will your agency/program implement the curriculum, or do you need to identify school personnel to be trained to deliver content? Will training school personnel or engaging them as a champion increase stakeholder (i.e., school, community, parent, and student) buy-in and increase retention and program sustainability (Hands, 2005)? Realistically assess partnership potential to avoid failed alliances. If working with a community-based site, focus on building the capacity of community partners (e.g., recreation centers, clinics) to sustain and continue to benefit from interventions after the funded implementation period is over.

RESOURCES

» **Podcast Episode:** Building and Strengthening Partnerships

» **Tip Sheet:** Increase Your Impact: Creating Mutually Beneficial Partnerships with Schools

Demonstrate the importance of program implementation

In addition to being realistic about what is needed to implement your program, explain to partners, youth, and parents why regular participation in the program is so important. Consider describing how the program components fit together and why there are the prescribed number of lessons in the curriculum. Explain that attending the majority of the sessions is critical for fully benefitting from the program. If you are working with a school, explain how your program can fulfill the school's health education requirements and help comply with state or local policies. When possible, create a crosswalk on how your curricula can be integrated into current health, science, or family and consumer science classes. Emphasize that adolescent pregnancy prevention programming not only includes content related to abstinence and contraception but also covers Adulthood Preparation Subjects, including Adolescent Development, Healthy Life Skills, Parent–Child Communication, Healthy Relationships, Financial Literacy, and Educational and Career Success (Lafferty & McIntosh, 2021).

Be creative and inclusive in your recruitment and curricula materials, especially through user-led designs

For all recruitment materials, clearly describe programs goals, expectations, benefits, and contact information in youth friendly language. If possible, have recruitment materials developed and reviewed by youth. Having youth involved in developing the outreach materials helps ensure continued engagement, increases the relevance of program efforts, and may increase retention (Madia, 2011). Translate materials and hire and train culturally responsive and inclusive staff. Create QR codes, which can provide quick access to recruitment and enrollment materials.

Create social media accounts for your project to increase access to youth beyond traditional venues. Engaging social media posts can lead to network-based online referral strategies where youth recruit friends. Select images and phrasing that represent the population to be served. Set up a website that describes your program and includes an online form and an email address where people can request further information, ask to participate, or refer participants.

Promote collaborative referrals and build your organizational presence in the community

Identify gatekeepers/champions for the population to be served, which may vary based on the population you are trying to reach. With increasing demands on school and community-based organizations (CBOs), learn the best contact to serve as a gatekeeper, which may include school counselors, social workers, health educators or teachers. Provide talking points or written materials and train gatekeepers/champions so they can address common questions and misconceptions. Partnering with gatekeepers/champions who are familiar to your target audience may increase program buy-in, recruitment, and retention, especially when working with priority populations. Include recruitment information in current communication methods of school-based organizations or CBOs. Send a brochure or QR code to access the information with back-to-school packets or co-recruit with popular community-based activities like sports. When possible, attend school open houses or place information on school or community organization letterhead to signal support. Promote your program during morning announcements, during school activities. Teachers, office staff, and other school champions play a key role in prompting students to share the forms with their parents and collecting signed forms. When possible, provide program champions an incentive for their assistance. Incentives do not have to be financial—classroom supplies are a welcomed and helpful resources that all teachers need!

Request referrals from community- and school-based partners and youth. Partner with CBOs that understand the dynamics of priority neighborhoods and have a standing relationship with and have built trust among youth. Leveraging the perceived credibility of the CBOs and their ability to connect with youth may increase the recruitment and retention of challenging-to-reach youth (Gordon, & Ullrich, 2017). Youth typically use multiple community programs, so partner strategically to increase recruitment and retention (Godley, 2018). When possible, develop a community advisory board of youth-serving agencies to facilitate collaborative referrals to not only your program but to youth-centered services throughout the community. Collaborate with school- and community-based afterschool programs to prevent offering services at overlapping or competing times.

Encourage youth referrals by developing a participant referral system that rewards youth referrals. Youth speaking highly of your project can lend legitimacy. Youth join and remain in programs based on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors, such as self-identity, friends who also attend the program, and hours that fit their schedules (Serido et al., 2014).

RESOURCE

» **Video:** Youth Voices - PREP Matters: Teens Speak Out on the Value of the Personal Responsibility Education Program

Support staff to develop positive, respectful, and supportive relationships with youth in the program
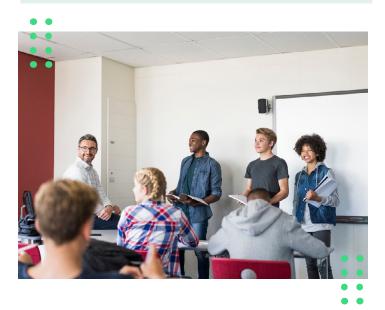
Facilitators have the responsibility of both implementing the evidence-based program and making sure that youth are having an enjoyable and fun experience in the program. Ensure that staff have received adequate training and have an opportunity to receive feedback and support to grow their skills related to engaging youth authentically, creating warm and inclusive environments and developing respectful relationships with youth (Liberman et al., 2021). The Search Institute has developed tools with specific strategies for supporting developmental relationships (Roehlkepartain, 2017), and the PILOT Tool (Moore et. al., 2018) offers organizations an opportunity to assess their current practices related to positive relationships; improved skills; linkages across schools, work, families and communities; opportunities to contribute and belong; and trustworthy and safe settings. These tools might help your program identify areas of strength and growth for program implementation.

Offer youth empowering opportunities

Youth prefer engaging, bidirectional interactions that develop a sense of community, offer opportunity for their voice and ideas to be heard, and create a safe and inclusive environment (Serido et al. 2014). Staff trained in health equity and trauma-informed care can met youth needs by tailoring curricula to be inclusive, avoiding messaging that may stigmatize youth, reducing possible triggers, and connecting youth to needed resources. Creating a welcoming environment where youth work collaboratively with peers and adults may increase participation, retention, confidence, and positive programmatic outcomes (Serido et al. 2014).

Having youth lead a session or participate in individual and creative activities throughout the program may improve recruitment and increase retention (Wright, 2004). Consider offering opportunities for youth to engage in real-life experiences that may provide volunteer hours or build workplace, self-sufficiency, and life skills (Hollister, 2003). Highlight direct benefits to schools and students from evidence-based programs that include community service learning—benefits to schools include campus improvement/beautification projects, peer tutoring, and even fundraising activities, while benefits to students include meeting community service requirements, leadership development and practice with decision making (Lafferty & McIntosh, 2021).

RESOURCES

» **Guide:** Creating Inclusive Spaces for Youth: A Facilitator's Guide to Equity and Inclusion in the Classroom

» **Video:** Youth Voices: Helping Facilitators of APP Programming Create Safe Spaces for Young People

» **Guide:** Creating Safe Spaces: Facilitator's Guide to Trauma-Informed Programming

» **Podcast Episode:** This is a Safe Space: Trauma-Informed Care

Provide incentives

Depending on your budget, a financial incentive may make your program more attractive to potential participants and broaden the program's economic diversity. Incentives could include a raffle of prizes, such as gift cards to movie theaters, local restaurants, and concerts. However, not all incentives need to be financial, and some can even be non-tangible. Offer items with the project logo, such as water bottles, t-shirts, hats, and other swag. Provide snacks if holding sessions after school. If your program is school based, check with the school to see if students are eligible to receive free snacks or transportation on school buses. Offer a pizza party to the class with the most returned permissions slips. At program completion, offer a celebration for youth who remained in the program (Elder et al., 2008).

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these tips can help increase both recruitment and retention in your programs. If your program is working to increase recruitment and retention, develop a plan for the changes that you will make and strategies you will use to address these concerns. In collaboration with your team, determine how frequently you will review the strategy to determine which aspects are most helpful. For example, will you review recruitment and retention data after each program cycle? Quarterly? Annually? Having a plan and reviewing it regularly will allow you to explore which strategies might be most helpful and where it might be most beneficial to further invest additional resources, such as time.

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