

Teen Outreach Program (TOP)

Overview

The Teen Outreach Program (TOP) is a school-based intervention for students in grades nine through 12. The primary goal of the program is to prevent high-risk behaviors such as school failure and adolescent pregnancy. Programs run the full academic year and include classroom discussion in combination with a supervised after-school community volunteer experience.

An experimental evaluation showed that teens from a variety of racial/ethnic groups and socioeconomic levels who participated in TOP were less likely to experience pregnancy or cause a pregnancy, and less likely to get suspended from school or to fail a school course during the time they were in the program than teens in a control group.

To date, TOP has operated in 15 states in rural, urban, and suburban settings and has involved 4,000 sponsors and 15,000 teens.

Program costs for a class of 18-25 range from \$100 to \$700 per student, with lower costs for volunteer program facilitators and donated space. Training costs are \$595 per person, including the \$295 curriculum. On-site training tailored to specific locations is available at a cost of \$8,000 plus additional fees for TOP resources for groups of 10 or more people.

Insights After the Fact

Key Challenges

TOP works best when it is added to an ongoing program, rather than when it operates on its own.

Lessons learned

TOP is more likely to be adopted by a community when it is presented as a partnership that can link with existing resources or programs.

Because TOP is a youth development program and not a sex education program per se, some facilitators may not be comfortable discussing reproductive health topics. In the training, TOP facilitators are encouraged to bring in outside speakers to cover pregnancy prevention and related topics.

Source: Lynda Bell, former National TOP Coordinator.

Program Description

The Teen Outreach Program (TOP) was evaluated between 1991 and 1995 in 25 urban and rural high schools in several states. The program was designed to reduce teen pregnancy rates and school failure by providing adolescents with a broad spectrum of developmental opportunities.

Population Served

TOP serves adolescents in grades nine through 12, and is suitable for students from all racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Setting

TOP is implemented as part of the school curriculum during the academic year. Teens participate in the classroom and during after-school and weekend hours in the community. In the evaluated program, students could receive course credit for participating in TOP as part of a health or social studies class.

Goals

TOP was designed to reduce the incidence of school failure (measured as course failure and suspension rates) and teen pregnancy. The goal of the program is to help adolescents make educated decisions about their lives and become productive adults.

Type of Intervention

TOP consists of two components: volunteering in the community and activities in the classroom.

Main Messages

Although one key objective is avoiding adolescent pregnancy, reproductive health was not a primary topic in the classroom. The overriding message is that teens can and do make important contributions to the community. Lessons and discussions reinforce positive decision-making and promoted self-awareness and positive self-worth.

When sex and related issues are discussed, abstinence is emphasized along with contraception.

Implementation/Logistics

Length of program: TOP lasts the full academic year. Students meet at least once each week in the classroom for discussion sessions and volunteer for a minimum of 20 hours a year, with the average student recording 35 hours.

Size of program evaluation: The evaluation TOP program was conducted in 25 sites and included 342 students.

Components of intervention: TOP incorporates three activities: 1) supervised volunteering, 2) classroom discussions pertaining to volunteer experiences, and 3) classroom discussions and activities linked to positive adolescent development.

- Supervised volunteering. High school students select a volunteer opportunity within their community ranging from helping out in hospitals and nursing homes to peer tutoring. They research each agency or service before selecting their activity. Throughout the year, participants meet with their volunteer supervisor or trained classroom facilitator to discuss their experiences.
- Classroom discussions on volunteering. Weekly classroom sessions complement community volunteerism. Students share their experiences with one another and lessons from the Changing Scenes curriculum are used (see details below).
- Other classroom activities and discussions. Classroom-based discussions and activities promote positive social development. The Changing Scenes curriculum contains age-appropriate topics and activities (see details below).

Staffing requirements: TOP requires a trained classroom facilitator, a site coordinator, and an adult supervisor for the volunteer experience. The classroom adult's role is to facilitate discussions of the Changing Scenes curriculum and the volunteer experiences. The adult supervisor for the volunteer portion of TOP guides students in their community volunteer activities.

Curriculum

Students meet at least once a week in the classroom during the school year to discuss the community volunteer component of the program, and to use the Changing Scenes curriculum. Lessons address topics such as communication, values, feelings, and goal-setting.

To make TOP appropriate for a range of grades and ages, the curriculum has four levels. Each level contains material that is developmentally appropriate for the age group involved (Level I: 12- to 13-year olds. Level II: 14-year-olds. Level III: 15- to 16-year olds. Level IV: 17- to 19-year olds.) Examples of activities include:

- Learning active listening skills through a story about two people who have a miscommunication and make inaccurate assumptions about each other (Level II).
- Discussing pressures to have sex and identifying reasons to wait (Level III).

- Identifying gender roles through case scenarios (Level IV).

Although the curriculum varies with classroom level and volunteer experience, some examples of chapters in the Level II Changing Scenes illustrate the curriculum's overarching approach:

- A chapter on values includes: An introduction on "What does your family say?" in which students explore how they learn values.
 - An activity that allows boys and girls to discuss gender roles.
- A chapter on development that addresses: Health and hygiene.
 - "Looking back" where students think about how their lives have changed as they have grown older.
 - Interviewing a family member about changes he or she experienced in early adolescence.
- A chapter on relationships includes activities on: Making friends, including a discussion on qualities that people look for in a friend and qualities that they find off-putting.
 - Romantic relationships in which students are assigned to groups in which half discuss characteristics they would like to see in a romantic partner and the other half discuss ideal characteristics of a best friend. The whole class then discusses how these characteristics are similar or different.
 - Determining the difference between love and infatuation.
 - Dealing with pressure situations in relationships.
- A chapter on influence includes sessions on: Television viewing and choices that students must make. Teens pretend to be parents of a five- to ten-year-old child and must decide which programs they will allow their child to watch and why.
 - Social pressures tied to gender and culture.
- A chapter on sexuality includes: An introduction to myths and facts about sex.
 - A game called "STD Jeopardy," which tests students' knowledge of STDs.
 - A look at pregnancy probability depending on the type of contraceptive used.
- A chapter on communications/assertiveness includes: An introduction to active listening that teaches students effective methods of communication.
 - A role-playing activity on how to be assertive.
- A chapter on goal setting includes: An introduction to short-term and long-term goal-setting.
 - An activity on setting and achieving goals in which students write down a timeline for achieving a goal, steps they can take to accomplish this goal, potential barriers, solutions to these barriers, and resources they can use to help get there.
 - A look at teenage parenthood that explores some of the difficulties it poses, such as dropping out of school and settling for low wage jobs.
- A chapter on decision-making includes: An introduction to examining decisions.
 - An activity that discusses the "3 Cs" of decision-making – challenges, choices, and consequences.

Evaluation

Type

TOP was evaluated between 1991 and 1995 using a random-assignment experimental design. A total of 342 students were randomly assigned to the experimental group and 352 students were assigned to the control group. Before this experimental evaluation, TOP was evaluated with quasi-experimental designs in several other locations.

Population

The program was evaluated with students in grades 9 through 12. The majority were female (85 percent) and, though the program was open to students of all racial/ethnic groups, most participants were African American (67 percent), followed by Caucasian (19 percent), Hispanic (11 percent), and other race/ethnicities (three percent).

Components

Instruments and frequency: Students in both the experimental and control groups filled out two self-report questionnaires. The first questionnaire was given one to two weeks after the program began and the second after the program was completed. The first questionnaire gathered information on the student's demographic characteristics as well as pre-existing problem behaviors (e.g., a prior pregnancy, school suspension in the past year, or failing a course in the previous year). The second questionnaire, which was administered after the program was completed, measured problem behaviors that occurred since the first questionnaire was returned.

Outcomes measured: The TOP evaluation measured whether program participants had failed a course, been suspended, or been pregnant/caused a pregnancy during the year they participated in TOP.

Findings

At program completion, the evaluation found that teens who participated in TOP were less likely to experience or cause a pregnancy, be suspended from school, or fail a course than were teens in the control group. Control group adolescents experienced more than twice the percentage of pregnancies than did adolescents in the program (9.8 percent vs. 4.2 percent).

After controlling for demographic characteristics, grade in school, and baseline problem behaviors, the evaluation team found that TOP had a similar effect on outcomes for all racial/ethnic groups, socioeconomic status groups, household composition categories, and grade levels. Compared to those in the control group, TOP had a greater effect on reducing the percentage of girls who became pregnant than it did on reducing the percentage of boys who caused pregnancies.

One factor that appeared associated with the likelihood of a student having/causing a pregnancy or being suspended from school was the number of hours he or she volunteered. Non-experimental analyses indicated that the more hours a student volunteered, the less likely she or he was to have or cause a pregnancy.

The program evaluators assert that, because TOP focuses broadly on adolescent decision-making and not just on sex, it may be more accepted in communities that are uncomfortable with an exclusive reproductive health approach (Allen, Philliber, Herrling & Kuperminc, 1997).

Contact Information and Resources

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Resources

Allen, J.P, Philliber, S., Herrling, S., Kuperminc, P.G. (August 1997). Preventing teen pregnancy and academic failure: Experimental evaluation of a developmentally based approach. *Child Development*, 64(4), 729-742.

Philliber, S., & Allen, J.P. (1992). Life options and community service: Teen Outreach Program. In Miller, B.C., Card, J.J., Paikoff, R.L., & Peterson, J.L. (Eds.) *Preventing adolescent pregnancy: Model programs and evaluations* (pp.139-155). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.