

Working with Young Men

Education program promotes sexual health and responsibility among high school and college men.

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The sexual health needs of young men have been largely ignored in the field of reproductive health. Young men are not underrepresented in reproductive health services simply because the services are not available to them. Men are underrepresented because they have not been socialized to seek reproductive health services. Young women from very young ages are encouraged to seek regular health care and receive annual reproductive health examinations such as pap tests and clinical breast exams. Men, however, influenced by gender norms and roles, seek out health care only under extreme circumstances. This gap in services is evident in the fact that during the past thirty years, only 2–4 percent of Title X family planning clinic clients have been men.

Reproductive health funding and services have historically targeted women—a strategy that seems sensible given that women ultimately bear the consequences of pregnancy. Although the focus on women has been successful in reducing teen pregnancy and some sexually transmitted infections, the United States continues to have high rates of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. More recently, public health professionals have become aware that in order for young women to be sexually healthy, the reproductive and sexual health needs of their male partners must be addressed.

Involving men

The public health strategy for providing reproductive health services and education to men is termed *male involvement*. Whether it is on the streets of Seattle or the ski slopes of Big Sky country, a central belief of the male involvement approach is to meet guys “where they are.” The core philosophy of the male involvement approach is to treat men as individuals in order to meet their unique reproductive and sexual health needs so that they can make healthy and well-informed choices about their sexual health and sexual behavior. Common male outreach themes include:

- Reducing the obstacles to care for men by creating male supportive environments within health care settings
- Training health care professionals to provide men with sexual and reproductive health education and services
- Building men’s skills by providing training on self



Benton County Health Dept.

Promoting the MARS program on the Oregon State University campus.

advocacy, decision making, goal setting and achieving, communication, healthy relationships, partner intimacy, negotiating sexual activity, and how to access information and services

- Offering counseling and mental health services for men
- Providing preventive health care services for men in addition to clinical diagnosis and treatment

The growing literature on male involvement programs demonstrates that incorporating a male involvement philosophy into clinic-based or community-based sexual health programs takes commitment and effort but can lead to successful results. One such male involvement program in Benton County, Oregon, is Male Advocates for Responsible Sexuality, or MARS.

Advocating for responsible sexuality

Located in the fertile Willamette Valley, Benton County is home to Oregon State University’s Beaver Nation, the infamous Squirrel’s restaurant and bar, and 21,000 males aged 13 to 25. Every fall thousands of young men converge on the Oregon State University campus to pursue their academic aspirations. At any time during the school year, young men can be seen walking to and from the Valley Library, rushing to class, playing in extramural sports, or hanging out in the eateries along Monroe Street. Weekends in Corvallis find the local Diary Queen, Blockbuster Video, and bowling alley packed with high-school-aged males fighting off the boredom that accompanies small town life. Whether abstinent or sexually active, these young men face multiple decisions related to enhancing and protecting their own and their partners’ reproductive health. Benton County, like many communities in the US, is a perfect place for a male involvement program.

Started in 2000 at the Benton County Health Department, MARS is an innovative male reproductive health demonstration project funded by the US Office of Population Affairs. MARS uses educational outreach and family planning clinical services to increase sexual responsibility among males ages 13 to 25. The mission of MARS is to support men in taking a responsible role in promoting equality and cooperation in relationships, pregnancy and infection prevention, and overcoming stereotypical gender

roles. Male peer health educators ages 18 to 24 form the core of the MARS program. They receive extensive training and are responsible for implementing the MARS program.

MARS has two components: educational outreach and clinical services. The educational outreach takes place in a variety of venues, from the bars and restaurants located throughout Benton County to the dining halls and fraternity meetings at Oregon State University. MARS outreach workers, clad in t-shirts that say “Respect Yourself,” hand out condoms, MARS pens and pencils, MARS “Respect Yourself” tattoos, and red and white wristbands to college-aged men. These items promote taking an active role in sexual health and coming in for a MARS clinical educational session. The MARS outreach workers also conduct a six-session MARS curriculum in the four Benton County school districts. Teams of two male MARS outreach workers facilitate the MARS curriculum in high school classrooms using a combination of media images, skits, role-plays, and small-group work. The emphasis of the MARS curriculum is on:

- Understanding how male and female stereotypes in our society influence decisions regarding sexual health
- Addressing the components of healthy relationships
- Communicating with your partner about sex and contraceptive use
- Obtaining information on sexual health issues, such as pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, abstinence, and contraceptive methods
- Knowing where and how young men can access sexual health services

One high school teacher commented, “So many kids don’t know what healthy relationships are, and don’t know how to make good decisions. I believe MARS teaches kids the importance of working together, and the MARS role-plays really help students to understand how to have healthy relationships.”

The MARS clinical educational appointments take place at the Benton County Health Department, Oregon State University Student Health Services, and Alsea Rural Health Center. The sessions are conducted by the MARS outreach workers and last from 30 to 45 minutes. Common topics covered in the MARS clinical appointments include how to properly use a condom, the effectiveness of different methods of birth control, the signs and symptoms for various sexually transmitted infections, the benefits of abstinence, and relationship issues. Young men who have attended MARS clinical appointments appreciate the openness and friendliness of the MARS outreach workers. One client commented, “I liked that the appointment was one-on-one. I wasn’t rushed. It was an open forum to discuss sex with no pressure.”

The MARS program evaluation uses qualitative and quantitative methods to assess program effectiveness and measure short-term outcomes. For classroom sessions, pre- and post-tests are administered at the start and end of the six-session series. The tests measure changes in student’s knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about gender roles, healthy relationships, self-efficacy in communicating with partners, decision-making skills, abstinence, contraceptives, sexually transmitted infections, and where to access free and confidential health care services. Teacher evaluation forms are also used to assess host classroom teachers’ perceptions

of the MARS curriculum and teaching skills of the MARS outreach workers. The clinical appointments are evaluated with client questionnaires and follow-up phone calls that measure changes in young men’s attitudes toward abstinence, healthy relationships, and contraceptive methods.

Evaluation findings from MARS are promising. Initial program results demonstrate statistically significant increases in student sexual health knowledge, confidence, and self-efficacy in communication, decision making, and knowl-

Strategies for Implementation

- Involve men from target populations in planning and implementation
- Partner with organizations that already work with males
- Offer incentives
- Provide skill-based education
- Implement a social marketing campaign to influence social norms
- Provide reproductive health services as part of sports physicals
- Create a gender-neutral environments for services

edge of where to go for sexual health services. In addition, the number of men attending MARS clinical sessions has increased dramatically, from 41 visits in year one to 270 visits in year two. Ninety-eight percent of men indicated they would recommend a MARS appointment to a friend.

Implementing male involvement programs

Male involvement is a new field in the area of reproductive and sexual health programming. At present no acceptable best practice exists for how to empower men to take an active role in their sexual and reproductive health and increase the use of reproductive health and clinical services. Young men need a wide range of sexual health education, reproductive health clinical services, counseling, and skill building that specifically targets them as individuals.

By engaging men as active participants in decisions regarding sexual and reproductive health, the chances of successfully reducing adolescent pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and other potential negative outcomes related to engagement in sexual activity can be substantial. ■

Authors

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Resources

The Family Planning Male Training Center. www.fpmtc.org.

Guidelines for Male Sexual and Reproductive Health Services: A Tool for Family Planning Providers. Region II Male Involvement Advisory Committee. www.cicatelli.org/titex/downloadable/GuidelilnesForMaleSexualReproductiveHealthServices.pdf.

In Their Own Right: Addressing the Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs of American Men. Alan Guttmacher Institute. 2003. www.guttmacher.org.

Sex and America’s Teenagers. The Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI). 1994. www.guttmacher.org.