A Practical Guide for Creating Safe and Supportive Environments in Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs

Overview

Ensuring that adolescents feel safe and supported is key to creating a teen pregnancy prevention (TPP) program culture that enhances self-esteem, self-confidence, and autonomy in order to equip youth with the skills and knowledge they need to make healthy decisions. This practical guide provides research-based tips to help TPP programs create safe and supportive environments for the youth they serve.

As you work to ensure that your TPP program is successfully creating a safe and supportive environment for all youth, keep the following points in mind:

1. Youth often feel uncomfortable talking about relationships and sexual health. Safe and supportive environments help build the **trust, self-confidence, and self-esteem** that all youth, especially those that have experienced trauma, need to discuss sensitive topics.

2. Ensuring **physical and emotional safety** creates a safe and supportive environment for all participants.

3. It is estimated that sixty-four percent of individuals in the U.S. have experienced at least one *adverse childhood experience* (ACE).[1] Because youth don't always talk about difficult or traumatic experiences, it is critical for TPP program staff to **foster a safe and supportive environment for ALL youth**.

4. Several **resources are available** to help organizations create safe and supportive environments, particularly for those at highest risk for poor sexual health outcomes.

Definitions

- **Physical safety:** an experience in which one is free from physical harm or threat.
- **Emotional safety:** an experience in which one is free from bullying, harassment and humiliation and is able to express emotions, feel confident to take risks, and supported in trying something new.

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Safety is Essential

Creating and maintaining physical and emotional safety is a primary factor for optimal adolescent development and a best practice for all youth-serving programs.[2] Physical and emotional safety are critical factors in violence prevention and trauma recovery[3] as well as teen pregnancy prevention[4]. A positive climate that is based on norms, values, and expectations that help students feel emotionally and physically safe increases young peoples' motivation to learn, reduces aggression, lowers substance use, and improves mental health.[5]

Ensuring a safe and supportive environment for all youth is essential when working to increase knowledge and skills needed to prevent teen pregnancy and make healthy decisions. In fact, because TPP programs often address sensitive topics, emotional and physical safety are particularly critical. Additionally, for youth who have experienced trauma, safety and support are vital in minimizing the negative effects of trauma and maximizing protective factors and resilience.[6]

Guiding Principles for Safe and Supportive Environments

Creating and maintaining a safe and supportive environment is a process with several interrelated components:

- Organizational policies and practices
- Staff practices
- Youth and community partners

While all three components are important, organizational policies and practices are the foundation that support staff practices and facilitate vital partnerships with youth and community partners.

> *More than anything else, being able to feel safe with other people defines mental health: safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives.*
>
> *-Bessel van der Kolk*

Organizational Policies and Practices

To ensure that TPP programs adhere to guiding principles for safe and supportive environments, it is important to have clear policies that are consistently monitored and enforced. While individual staff attitudes and skills are important, organizational policies and practices are the foundation for supporting those skills and promoting safe and supportive environments throughout all programming for youth. It is essential to educate staff and youth about policies and explain how they are implemented. Below is a list of policies and organizational practices to consider. You will find a list of resources at the end of this guide to help develop or strengthen your organization in each of these areas.

- **Anti-discrimination:** Anti-discrimination policies protect program participants and staff from discrimination based on age, disability, sex, race, color, national origin, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity. Organizations should periodically update their anti-discrimination policy and ensure that all staff and program participants are aware of the policy.

- **Anti-bullying and harassment:** Anti-bullying and harassment policies explicitly address the emotional and physical safety of program participants and staff. Staff and participants should be aware of the procedures for filing a complaint. Links to state regulations and a sample policy are included in the Resources section.

- **Physical safety:** It is important to ensure that youth are free from physical harm or threat. Assessing physical safety includes youth interactions with staff and peers in your program as well as how safe youth feel getting to your program space. School climate surveys and community mapping techniques can be adapted to help organizations establish a periodic assessment protocol to set priorities and track progress.

- **Professional development & training:** Professional development policies should include requirements for periodic training on trauma, implicit bias, working with at-risk youth (e.g., LGBTQ, homeless, foster care, juvenile justice, etc.), positive youth development, and self-care to optimize staff wellness, job performance, and role modeling. Policies should also address supervision and accountability to ensure staff receive ongoing support and feedback.

- **Program self-assessment:** Program self-assessments are an important part of monitoring policies and procedures in order to identify areas for improvement and document compliance.

- **Supportive partnerships:** Policies for developing partnerships should include protocols for assessing whether potential partner organizations provide safe and supportive environments for all youth. Consider asking youth who have been referred to partner organizations about their experiences as a part of your protocols. Make sure your policy is flexible enough to include a variety of potential partners who can help meet the physical and emotional safety needs of youth, such as: juvenile justice, education, health, and mental health organizations.

Staff Practices

Creating safe and supportive environments basically comes down to how TPP program staff interact with youth. Consider the following guiding principles for all interactions with youth: **care, nurture and respect**. On the next two pages there are questions intended to help TPP staff internalize these principles and provide concrete examples of how to most effectively work with youth. The principles are adapted from core components of Positive Youth Development[7] and Trauma-Informed Care[8]. They reflect several key elements of youth-focused, evidence-based programs, including being goal-directed, providing a structured approach, using techniques that involve repetitive practice with feedback, and problem solving.[9]

CARE: Show genuine concern for all youth.

- **Instill hope and expectation for a positive future:** Do I explicitly express belief in all youth's abilities to effect positive change in their lives? *Look for opportunities to acknowledge when youth make a positive change, no matter how small the change.*
- **Non-judgmental interaction:** Are my interactions with all youth warm, empathic, and genuine? *Be aware of the tone of your voice and body language. When engaged in conversations, use active listening skills so youth feel both heard and valued.*[10]
- **Confidentiality**: Do I explain and reinforce the limits of confidentiality using clear and simple language, stressing my role in keeping all youth safe? *Explain the legal requirements for reporting risk of harm to self or others at the beginning of the program. If youth ask for assurance that you won't tell anyone before disclosing something, reassure them that you will listen and support them while also reminding them about the limits of confidentiality.*
- **Acknowledge limitations:** Am I always clear and honest about my limits in providing physical and emotional safety? *Just like confidentiality, it is important to explain limitations in creating and maintaining safe environments. Don't make promises you can't keep, like saying that bullying won't happen. Focus on what you can promise, such as consistently enforcing respectful behavior.*

NURTURE: Create opportunities for all youth to learn new skills and gain confidence.

- **Affect regulation:** Do I teach, model, and reinforce healthy ways for youth to manage stress and express emotions without causing harm to self or others? *Explicitly encourage their efforts when you notice youth using healthy coping strategies to manage stress and express emotions.*
- **Positive youth development**: Do I elicit the strengths and resources of all youth in my program? *Create frequent opportunities to get to know the strengths and interests of youth through one-on-one conversations and group activities.*
- **Develop competency**: Do I provide all youth with opportunities to try out new skills and challenge themselves in a supportive environment? *Facilitate activities that give youth opportunities to discover new skills and increase knowledge such as practicing social skills and effective sexual communication.*[11]
- **Encouragement**: Do I encourage youth to accept mistakes as a learning experience and react with flexibility to support them? *Explicitly inform youth that you view mistakes as a normal part of learning and respond with flexibility that allows them to correct any mistakes.*[12]

RESPECT: Recognize the dignity and worth of all youth.

- **Respectful communication**: Do I clearly acknowledge each youth's right to make his or her own choices? *Let youth know in advance when you will be discussing potentially sensitive topics and clearly let them know that they do not have to participate in discussions that make them uncomfortable.*
- **Advertise acceptance**: Are there visible signs that this program is a place where diversity is respected and valued? *Display images that reflect the diversity of youth impacted by teen pregnancy.*
- **Respect Identity**: Do I always use words that respect diverse racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation identities? *Use diverse examples so all youth feel represented. Learn and use youth's chosen names and preferred pronouns with regards to gender identity.*
- **First do no harm:** Do I avoid words or behavior that could traumatize or stigmatize anyone? *When youth are being disruptive, avoid confronting or embarrassing them as such behavior could escalate a situation and re-traumatize a youth who has experienced trauma.*

Youth and Community Partners

When working to create a safe and supportive environment for youth, it is critical to engage with youth as well as community partners. Not only can these stakeholders provide valuable information that can be used to assess how well you are doing, but they can also serve as invaluable partners as you identify opportunities for improvement. Make sure to engage with youth and community partners on an on-going basis.

- **Youth engagement**: Programs should consider creating formal and informal opportunities – such as focus groups and surveys – for youth to provide input. Youth Leadership Councils can serve as valuable partners in assessing, planning, and implementing efforts to foster a safe and supportive environment for all youth. Links to several school climate surveys that can be adapted for TPP programs as well as guidance on how to actively engage youth are located in the Resources section.

- **Community partners and stakeholders**: Community Advisory Groups can also serve as valuable partners in assessing, planning, and implementing efforts to foster a safe and supportive environment for all youth. Community partners can play a critical role in identifying potential strategies to promote safe and supportive environments for youth and the local resources to support those strategies. Community stakeholders can be particularly helpful if community concerns, such as violence, have been identified as a physical safety concern for youth in your program.

Summary

Physical and emotional safety are the foundation for effective programs for teen pregnancy prevention. Creating a safe and supportive environment within TPP programs can help youth learn they can take risks, speak truthfully about difficult experiences, and learn skills that will empower them to achieve their goals and make healthy choices related to their sexual and reproductive health.

Resources

Disclaimer: This is a list of some, but not all, of the relevant resources available to support organizations in providing safe and supportive environments for ALL youth. OAH does not endorse any of the resources listed other than those developed by OAH.

Anti-discrimination, Anti-bullying, and Anti-harassment

- **Website**: *Multiple resources on anti-bullying* (OAH). http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/resources-and-publications/publications/healthy-relationships.html#Bullying and School Climate
- **Website**: *Laws, regulations, guidance, & MOUs related to discrimination and harassment in the workplace* (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission). http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/index.cfm
- **Policy brief**: *Providing a Safe, Nondiscriminatory School Environment for Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Students* (California School Boards Association). https://www.csba.org/GovernanceAndPolicyResources/DistrictPolicyServices/~/media/CSBA/Files/GovernanceResources/PolicyNews_Briefs/Transgender/201402_PBNonDiscriminationGender.ashx
- **Database**: *HHS Resource Center on Bullying with links to state anti-bullying laws and regulations* (Stopbullying.gov). http://www.stopbullying.gov/laws/index.html
- **Sample policy**: *Sample Anti-Bullying Policy* (American Bar Association). http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/events/labor_law/2012/03/national_conference_on_equal_employment_opportunity_law/mw2012eeo_eisenberg2.authcheckdam.pdf

Professional Development

- **Tip sheet**: *Five Things to Know About Staffing Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs* (OAH). http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/teen_pregnancy/training/Assests/staffretention-tipsheet.pdf
- **On-line course**: *Creating a Safe Space for LGBTQ Teens* (Family and Youth Services Bureau). http://ncfy-learn.jbsinternational.com/course/index.php?categoryid=12
- **Toolkit**: *Creating Safe Spaces for GLBT Youth* (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network). http://www.glsen.org/safespace
- **Guide:** *Linking the Roads: Working with Youth Who Experience Homelessness & Sexual Violence* (National Sexual Violence Resource Center). http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc-publications-guides-linking-roads-working-youth-who-experience-homelessness.pdf

Physical Safety

- **Assessments**: *A compendium of valid and reliable measures of school climate* (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments). http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/school-climate-measurement/school-climate-survey-compendium
- **Website:** *Multiple resources and training to prevent youth violence* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). http://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/stryve/home.html
- **Website:** *Multiple resources on youth safety including digital and internet safety* (National Organizations for Youth Safety). https://noys.org/

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Resources (continued)

Program Self-assessment

- **Checklist**: *A Checklist for Putting Positive Youth Development Characteristics into Action in Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs* (OAH). http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/teen_pregnancy/training/Assests/pyd-tpp-checklist.pdf
- **Checklist**: *A Checklist for Integrating a Trauma-Informed Approach into Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs* (OAH). http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/teen_pregnancy/training/Assests/traumainformed-checklist.pdf
- **Assessment**: *Trauma-Informed Agency Assessment* (Thrive Initiative). http://thriveinitiative.org/trauma-informed/trauma-informed-agency-assessment/
- **Toolkit**: *Creating Safe Space for GLBTQ Youth: A Toolkit* (Advocates for Youth) http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advfy/documents/safespace.pdf

Youth and Community Engagement

- **Tip sheet:** *Referrals and Linkages to Youth-Friendly Health Care Services* (OAH). http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/teen_pregnancy/training/Assests/referrals_and_linkages_to_youth_friendly_health_care.pdf
- **Website**: *Multiple resources on engaging youth* (OAH). http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/teen_pregnancy/training/engagement.html#EngagingYouth
- **Website:** *Multiple resources on engaging with partner organizations* (OAH). http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/teen_pregnancy/training/building-collaborations.html#community
- **Toolkit:** *Guidance on how to implement photovoice – a strategy for assessing community safety* (Community Tool Box). http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/photovoice/main

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