"Tell Me About It" - a Community-based Project to Reduce the Rate of Teen Pregnancy in Wagga Wagga

Jacinta Makin, Susan Butler

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Jacinta Makin, Susan Butler, Occupational therapy students, University of South Australia

BACKGROUND

As part of the requirements of the undergraduate occupational therapy degree, at the University of South Australia, final year students are required to carry out a community oriented project in collaboration with an agency to address an identified need or issue. In collaboration with the Adolescent Pregnancy Support Midwife at Wagga Wagga Base Hospital and Anglicare-Bungarimbil a ten week project was conducted aimed at addressing the high rate of teenage pregnancy.

The needs analysis conducted in September 1999 revealed that Wagga Wagga has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Australia. Statistics released in June 2000 state that the rate is double the state average. Correspondence with local health professionals and interviews with high school students indicated a lack of effective sex education in schools was a major factor contributing to this situation. The results from the interviews identified that peer-to-peer sex education was an effective method of delivering this information. Literature also supports the notion of using peers as teachers as teenagers remember lessons taught by peers much better than those taught by teachers.\(^1,2,3\)

Project overview

Tell Me About It was based on concepts developed from a program run in Adelaide called “Reality — our truth of being a young parent”\(^4\). Participants in Tell Me About It were contacted via the Adolescent Pregnancy Support Midwife at the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital. The project was conducted using a participatory approach, which involved collaboration with the group members and local communities. The content of the Tell Me About It was derived from the knowledge and ideas of all group members who were involved in all processes of development and implementation. Through regular meetings, the issues faced with being teenage parents were discussed and the major themes drawn out. A presentation was put together encompassing all major issues seen as important by the adolescent parents involved and a resource package was developed. The package consists of a handout for the school students, a large calendar depicting a typical pregnancy and parenthood, a promotional brochure and a number of small visual props.
Project aim
To increase the awareness of high school students of the reality of being a teenage parent.

In late June 2000, a group of teenage parents, aged from 16 to 19 years, was formed to develop and implement a presentation to increase the awareness of high school students of the reality of being a teenage parent.

Project objectives
In order to achieve the project aim the following objectives were set.

♦ To obtain financial assistance to complete the project.
♦ To establish a core group of young parents who are interested in developing a resource to improve the awareness of high school students of the reality of teen parenting.
♦ To develop an educational program aimed at high school students with the group of young parents.
♦ To implement the education program in two different high schools, targeting year nine and ten students.

METHODOLOGY

The development and implementation of Tell Me About It was based on participatory methods. This involved forming a core group of teenage parents to plan, develop and implement the educational package. Participants in Tell Me About It were contacted via the Adolescent Pregnancy Support Midwife at the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital. She communicated the project aims and encouraged them to contact the project co-ordinators if they were interested in participating further. 12 potential participants showed interested in the project with 5 young parents forming the core group. The remaining participants were unable to continue due to time constraints, insufficient motivation and life stresses. The group met three times a week over a 7-week period for approximately 1½ hours each session.

Meetings took place at a neutral location accessible to public transport. The premises were owned by Anglicare-Bungarimbil who further supported the project by covering administrative costs. The participants often had to bring their children along to the meetings, as childcare facilities were not provided.

In early meetings, the focus was to draw out issues associated with being a teenage parent. From these brainstorms, themes were drawn which were then put into a presentation format. Most of the participants felt daunted by the prospect of speaking in front of groups of people. To help increase their confidence of speaking in public and answering questions training was conducted by Toastmasters International, an organisation that teaches communication and leadership skills. Utilising community agencies and resources increased the awareness of the program and helped to facilitate sustainability.
Prior to implementation of the presentation into Wagga Wagga High School a practice session was conducted in front of health professionals and other members of the Wagga Wagga community. This allowed the participants to reflect and improve their public speaking and presentation skills to further enhance the presentation. Other feedback gained from the audience was acted upon to improve the presentation for high school students.

Presentation content was checked with the Wagga Wagga High School Vice Principal to ensure the information was appropriate, pitched at the right level and complemented the existing health education given at that school.

The project was implemented into high schools during weeks 8 and 9 and evaluation was completed during the tenth week. 12 forty-minute presentations were conducted at Wagga Wagga High School to all year nine and ten students. There were approximately 25 students in each session with a total of 300 teenagers targeted.

A variety of activities were undertaken including media coverage (television, radio and newspaper), presentations to several organisations within the community and invitations distributed to other schools. This contributed to increasing the awareness of the issues associated with teenage pregnancy, aided the sustainability of the program and gave Tell Me About It its own identity.

**EVALUATION**

**Impact of the program**

Evaluation forms were developed to provide a mechanism for feedback regarding the impact of the presentation. These were drafted and critiqued by the young parents, the school, health professionals and members of the community (adult and adolescent). The evaluation forms assessed the student’s degree of learning and effectiveness of the program. Due to time constraints the forms were handed to teachers to be completed in the next lesson where class discussion was encouraged. The evaluation forms collected quantitative and qualitative data. This data was collated and reported.

The impact of the program in the wider community was evaluated through informal discussions with key stakeholders (teachers, students, the core group, the Adolescent Pregnancy Support Midwife and the staff at Bungarimbil) and members of the Wagga Wagga community. Media coverage and formal correspondence supported the findings from the informal discussions.

**Project development**

The progress of the project development was monitored and evaluated via a reflective journal written by the project co-ordinators (Susan Butler and Jacinta Makin), and informal discussions with the core group of young parents, the Vice Principal of Wagga Wagga High School, Toastmasters International and supervisors. Other strategies for monitoring included checking project progress against the set time line to ensure completion by the date.
The journal was used at the completion of each session to record attendance, what was achieved during the session, behaviour observations, general feelings and plans of what needed to be done.

RESULTS

Impact of the presentation

Quantitative results

The quantitative data was collated and represented as percentages in pie and bar graphs in order to make comparisons.

Students were asked to rank the effectiveness of the presentation, their knowledge levels and interest levels on a scale of one to ten. The majority of respondents (86%) rated the presentation at the level of 7 or above, indicating the presentation was very effective (Figure 1). A large proportion of the respondents (95%) reported that they found the presentation interesting (Figure 2). The knowledge levels of the students did not appear to increase as dramatically as the previous two results (Figure 3). This could have been because whilst the information conveyed may not have been new information for some students, it was delivered in a way that maximised its impact and effectiveness. This was further highlighted when 91% of respondents felt it would be beneficial to repeat the session to other teenagers. 90% of the respondents reported that they are more aware of what’s involved with having a baby (Figure 4) and 88% felt they would be more cautious when considering having sex (Figure 5).
These responses clearly indicate the effectiveness of the presentation and demonstrate that the recipients of the presentation are more aware of the reality of being a teenage parent. These figures are further supported by the qualitative data.

**Qualitative results**

Questions from the evaluation form yielded comments, which could be generalised and grouped into themes and subgroups. Analysis of these comments involved separating the statements and systematically grouping them. The statements in each theme and subgroup are represented in a discussion of that theme. Themes include impact of having a child, risks and consequences of having sex, contraception, sex and effectiveness of presenters.

**Impact of having a child**

The awareness of the reality of being a teenage parent increased among the students who witnessed *Tell Me About It*. The impact on your life of having a child is one aspect that was highlighted. A large number of students commented on how they had learnt more about what’s involved with caring for a baby and the way a child can change your life such as your daily routine, money expenditure, lack of time to self and lack of spontaneity. One student stated “It makes us more aware of how much fun we get to have now but if we had a baby we couldn’t do half of that stuff so I don’t want to have a baby yet.” Other students were struck by the enormity of raising a child, which is a lifetime commitment. The extra stress that is placed on a person effects their relationships, body and friends. A few students mentioned “It shows that motherhood/pregnancy is hard, especially at such a young age”. Another stated “it made me realise I shouldn’t waste my teenage years.”

**Risks and consequences of sex**

*Tell Me About It* has increased awareness about how serious the risks and consequences of having sex are and that “it can happen to you”. The presentation highlighted the negative aspects of sex, which many students found beneficial. “It makes you realise that sex isn’t all good”. A large number of students were amazed at how easy it is to fall pregnant and that girls can fall pregnant even when using protection. Other issues
emphasised were STDs, facts about contraception, the minimal crisis housing support available in Wagga and the life changes resulting from having a child. Respondents remarked knowing the seriousness of the risks and consequences will make them more cautious when having sex.

**Contraception**

Many students found that the presentation was beneficial to them because they gained more awareness about contraception. The fact that no contraception is 100% effective was one of the main points commented on. They appear to have learnt that if you are considering having sex it is important to use contraception in order to prevent the consequences such as falling pregnant. Many responses indicated that the students would be more careful when having or considering having sex. One student commented “I’m going to use contraception all the time” and another stated “when I have sex I’m going to be really careful”.

**Sex**

After hearing the presentation a surprising number of students commented on the importance of having sex with the right person and waiting until you are ready to have sex. An overwhelming number of students responded that the presentation will make them think twice before having sex as they can now recognise the impact that peer pressure has on their decisions to have sex. One student commented, “It’s made me … never give in to peer pressure because that’s how most of it happens”. The presentation has also helped many students realise they are not ready for the consequences of sex. Once student reported that “there is just so much pressure to have sex but the girls explained how easy it is to catch something or get pregnant — and its not worth it”. The presentation has been very successful as many students took home messages such as “it told me not to be hasty with making decisions that involve sex”.

**Presenters**

One of the most influential aspects of the presentation appeared to be the presenters themselves. “It was good because they were REAL people with WHO HAVE REAL experiences. A video wouldn’t have had the same effectiveness.” The openness and honesty of the presenters created a relaxed atmosphere in which they shared their experiences. They were willing to answer questions and “able to talk about everything without getting embarrassed.” With their down to earth attitude they made the consequences seem real and not fictional and enabled the students to understand what they were saying. “The speakers were young, so we could relate to them.” Students were able to really take on board the information, which was presented by people only a few years older than themselves. One student wrote “I learnt more than I would from a health teacher, I understand it better and I can look at it in a different way.” Hearing this information from peers makes them realise that it can happen to them.

**Community reactions**

*Tell Me About It* has been hugely successful in the wider community, which has been evident through informal discussions and correspondence. After presentations members of the community have approached the group asking how they can get the program implemented at their children’s schools. There has been an overwhelming response from other schools in the Wagga district requesting the program to be conducted at
their school. Other responses have indicated that the program has been worthwhile, beneficial, very effective and essential to be incorporated into school sex education programs. This proactive approach has been very well received, with the community pleased that this need is finally being addressed.

The media response to *Tell Me About It* has been very positive and comprehensive. Articles have been printed in two local newspapers, have featured in two television news bulletins and several local radio stations.

The response from Wagga Wagga High School has been excellent. The teachers have given extremely positive reviews stating the program covers topics that students need to hear in a way the students can relate to.

**Unexpected results**

An informal support group has been formed among the core group of young parents. This has been evident through observation of behaviour during meetings, discussions with the girls and reflection on journal entries. The group members have said *Tell Me About It* has been beneficial for them as new friendships have been formed and has helped them to realise their own strengths and limitations. To foster this relationship part of every meeting was spent discussing personal issues.

The core group of young parents have increased their confidence considerably. This has been observed at schools and commented on by teachers, toastmasters, community members, health professionals, project co-ordinators and the girls themselves. Their public speaking skills have improved and personal confidence appears to have increased, as has their ability to adapt the presentation to a different audience.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations have been formed from student and community feedback and observations by the project co-ordinators. It is suggested that these recommendations be acted upon when further developing and implementing *Tell Me About It* or when developing a similar project.

- Increase the length of the sessions to enable issues to be covered in more depth and other issues to be incorporated into the presentation.
- Alter the content of the presentation to incorporate more of a male focus.
- Time is made available to complete evaluation forms at the conclusion of each presentation in order to maximise returned forms.
- Add the date, sex and age of the respondent to the evaluation form to enable more accurate comparisons and generalisations to be made regarding the impact of *Tell Me About It*.
- Presenters to receive training in sex education to ensure accuracy of presentation content.
♦ Presenters to receive further public speaking training, group work training, conflict management training and communication training to enable more effective delivery of the presentation.

♦ Presenters receive training to enable them to teach other young parents the skills required to present Tell Me About It in high schools.

♦ Conduct a study that explores the long-term effects of Tell Me About It on the teenage pregnancy rates in Wagga Wagga.

♦ Work closely with high schools as some of the topics covered in sex education classes could be covered by Tell Me About It.

♦ Obtain funding for the program to assist the presenters to cover costs incurred such as travel, personal time and child care.

Conclusion

Tell Me About It was an effective way of increasing school students’ awareness of the risks and consequences associated with having sex. Having young mothers presenting meant the students could relate to what they were saying and the full impact of the messages conveyed were understood. The presenters highlighted that “it could happen to you, it happened to us” and were willing to answer personal questions to further enforce the reality of being a teenage mother. The positive response from school students, teachers, other schools and community members further emphasises the program’s effectiveness.

Tell Me About It was a cost-effective program as it utilised community resources to train and educate the core group and to develop the educational package. This involvement enabled the community to have a degree of ownership. The low costs associated with this program make it possible to implement in other communities. Strong networks have been formed between health services, education services, community members and local agencies. These links will assist the program to continue in the future. A strong bond has also been developed between the members of the core group. The core group dedicated many hours of their own time and opened themselves to scrutiny, which was fundamental to the success of the program.

The success of the project has largely been a result of using participatory methods and maximising community resources. These methods have allowed the community to develop a strong sense of ownership and a vested interest to sustain the project. Interest from Wagga Wagga high schools will ensure Tell Me About It will continue to be operational in 2000. The Student Welfare Officer from the Education Department has agreed to act as co-ordinator of the program in the future, which will allow it to continue in 2001, and years to come. The core group of young parents are able to continue their participation in the short term and have agreed to train other young parents wishing to be part of the program in the future.

If Tell Me About It can continue to be part of the sex education in schools for years to come, it will have a vital role in reducing the rates of teenage pregnancy in Wagga
Wagga. This will be achieved by adolescents being more cautious when considering having sex as a result of their awareness of the reality of being a teenage parent.

REFERENCES


4. YWACSS (Young Women’s and Children’s Support Services Coalition Inc.). 1997, Reality — our truth of being a teenage parent, Adelaide:SA.