

FRIENDS FIRST Adolescent Family Life Project: An Implementation Study of Two Programs

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Introduction

The non-profit organization, FRIENDS FIRST, offers two abstinence education programs: The STARS Mentoring Program and The Quinceañera Program. The STARS Mentoring Program is a peer mentoring program whereby high school students mentor middle school students. In the Quinceañera Program participants learn about abstinence, relationships, refusal skills, and other relevant topics while preparing for their Quinceañera, the rite of passage ceremony in the Hispanic culture.

The STARS Mentoring Program targets students in 6th – 7th grade. The main components to STARS are: (1) Eleven weekly consecutive after-school clubs (2 hours each), where 9th – 12th grade students mentor 6th – 7th grade middle school students; (2) A parent program consisting of four 2-hour seminars in which parents learn about communicating with adolescents; and (3) the Annual STARS National Conference, an action-packed four-day event designed to empower STARS mentors to remain abstinent or re-establish sexual boundaries. STARS serves over 160 students per year, along with their parents, annually. STARS activities last throughout the school year.

The Quinceañera Program is a 24-hour curriculum offered over an 8-week period for Hispanic girls ages 12 to 15 and their parents. By honoring the traditional values of the Hispanic quinceañera rite of passage on the fifteenth birthday, participants explore topics including character development, refusal skills, boundaries, love, relationships, peer pressure, communication with their parents and peers, and the benefits of sexual abstinence until marriage. In addition to the weekly lessons, the program includes a community service project and a graduation ceremony to celebrate participants' commitments to abstinence until marriage.

The primary evaluation question in this study is the same for both programs – are there statistically significant differences between participants receiving the Friends First programs and those in control groups on the following factors: (1) understanding that abstinence is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases; (2) understanding that abstinence is the expected standard for school-aged children; (3) understanding the marriage benefits of remaining abstinent while unmarried; (4) likelihood of practicing abstinence or reestablishing sexual abstinence; (5) likelihood of virgins remaining abstinent; (6) number of partners of sexually active participants; (7) likelihood of discontinuing sexual activity; and (8) communication between parent and child.

Methods

This project is just beginning its second year. The first year was used as an implementation study. During the implementation phase, processes for data collection were developed, and survey instruments were pilot tested.

Quantitative Portion – STARS. The design for the quantitative portion of the study is a group-randomized trial. FRIENDS FIRST targeted geographically, culturally, and ethnically diverse, at-risk-communities. Eight middle schools (2 in each of 4 communities) were recruited and agreed to be randomly assigned to be either a control school or a treatment school. Four schools received the STARS program and four schools received an alternate program (Tae Kwon Do). A nested cohort design will be used in the data analysis phase for evaluation questions related to sub-scores such as “understanding that...”. Logistic regression will be used for the “likelihood” questions. The data collection for the quantitative portion includes pre-treatment (baseline) surveys and post-treatment (follow-up) surveys for both students and parents with annual follow-up surveys every 12 months for 3 years after participation in the program.

Quantitative Portion – Quinceañera. The design for the Quinceañera was a quasi-experimental design consisting of six groups receiving the program and six control groups not receiving the program. Each group is located at a church with congregations familiar with the Quinceañera. Like the STARS program, pre- and post-treatment surveys are being administered to youth and parents, before treatment, after treatment, and every 12 months for 3 years following program completion. Multi-level modeling will be used to analyze the data.

Process Level Evaluation – STARS National Conference. Focus groups and interviews were used for the qualitative portion of the evaluation of STARS. Four focus groups were conducted at the Stars National Conference: one group of female students both before and after the conference, and another group of male students both before and after. Ten one-on-one interviews both before and after the school year are being conducted. Post-conference process level surveys were administered in order to determine the effectiveness of the conference.

IRB Approval. The first IRB approval was granted by the University of Northern Colorado in February 2008. A change of protocol, which included the interviews and focus groups, was granted in June 2008. A completely new IRB application was approved in October 2008. The new IRB was needed because of several design changes from the original design.

Instrumentation. There are three baseline surveys and three corresponding follow-up surveys. The baseline surveys include (1) CORE instrument (for youth), (2) Friends First baseline survey (for youth), and (3) Friends First baseline parent survey. The corresponding follow-up surveys are similar to the baseline surveys. All six surveys have also been translated into Spanish.

Variables of interest. The primary variables of interest include:

- “only certain way” – attempts to measure the understanding a student has that abstinence is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.
- “intent to practice (or re-establish) sexual abstinence” – attempts to measure the participants’ intentions
- “abstinent” – the count of participants’ who are sexually abstinent
- “expected behavior” – attempts to measure whether the youth participant believes the expectation of teenagers is to remain abstinent.
- “marriage benefits” – attempts to measure the participants’ understanding that abstinence from non-marital sexual activity will increase the potential to form healthy marriages
- “number of partners” – for those participants who have had sex before, this is the count of their total number of partners
- “abstinence from this point on” – a measure of intent to stay abstinent from those who have previously had sex
- “parent-child communication” – a score on communication between parent and child

Results

At the present time, the only data analysis that has been completed is the process level evaluation data from the STARS National Conference. Focus Groups indicate the conference exceeded the students’ expectations and left an extremely positive impression on the students. Students felt empowered to stay abstinent and learned refusal skills. More importantly students gained a deep understanding as to why abstinence is the best choice.

The process level survey data given at the end of the conference also indicated positive results (N = 277). Almost 80% of conference attendees reported making a promise (or renewing their promise) not to have sex before marriage. Eighty-six percent reported feeling confident about being able to mentor and/or lead other students. Eighty-three percent reported having stronger leadership skills than before the conference. Eighty-five percent reported having stronger refusal skills than before the conference. Eighty-seven percent of participants reported they intend to avoid situations and risk, such as drug use and alcohol consumption.

Further results included processes for collecting data. Protocols for data collection were written which included materials lists, and step-by-step procedures for administering surveys in a standardized format. Special situations came up during this implementation year that were then added to the data protocols For example: What if one or more parents participates in the program with two or more children? We made the decision to have one parent and the oldest child fill out the surveys for the evaluation.

Discussion

Early results from the process level evaluation indicate the STARS National Conference is an effective tool for motivating students to make a commitment to abstinence. The stories by the speakers were highlights for students. The implementation phase of the project was valuable in helping to determine processes for survey data collection as well as to collect qualitative data.

Implications

The findings from the process level survey data are extremely limited in nature. Abstinence education providers may want to consider offering a conference designed to motivate and empower students to make a commitment to abstinence.

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