



## Success Story: Southeast Mississippi Rural Health Initiative

### *Improving Family Communication through Parent Forums*

Founded in 1979, [Southeast Mississippi Rural Health Initiative](#) has a longstanding commitment to improving the health of residents of rural southeast Mississippi. Supported with funding from the [Office of Adolescent Health](#), the organization began to implement the evidence-based program *Making a Difference!* in 2010 to address the community's high rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.<sup>1,2</sup>

*Making a Difference!* includes eight one-hour sessions delivered in a group setting, focused on abstinence, HIV/STI prevention, life skills, and teen pregnancy prevention. The curriculum includes role playing, addresses peer pressure, and focuses on negotiation skills. The facilitators of the program are primarily health educators and nurses. Southeast Mississippi Rural Health Initiative has implemented the program in 30 locations across southeast Mississippi, including schools, faith-based organizations, and community centers. They have reached over 1,400 teens since scaling up implementation in 2011. The organization is proud to report that in an evaluation of five sites, when youth were asked if *Making a Difference!* helped them choose abstinence or to delay sexual intercourse, 94% of participants responded "yes." When asked about the program, students reported that "it's real life, not text book!" and that it "helped me focus my goals."



Pastor Robert Johnson talks with parents about how to keep the communication open between parents and youth at a 2014 *Let's Talk* event. *Photo Credit: Southeast Mississippi Rural Health Initiative.*

Implementation of *Making a Difference!* has affected not just the youth in the program, but their families as well. During implementation, parents started asking staff about how to discuss sexual health and other sensitive issues with their teens. Staff members had not anticipated these high levels of parental involvement, but were excited to start a dialogue, especially given research on parental influence on teens' decisions about sexual health and relationships.<sup>3</sup> As a result, staff at Southeast Mississippi Rural Health Initiative created a quarterly parent forum called *Let's Talk: A Parent Conversation*. Usually, about 40 parents participate in the forum during which they have the opportunity to share their struggles and successes with teen communication in a safe space. Parents also listen to a panel of experts, including a health professional, a social worker, and a *Making a Difference!* educator. Sometimes, other community members such as pastors or school counselors join the panel as well.



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The camaraderie among the parents is evident by their involvement and questions. While the forum has not been formally evaluated, staff have heard about its success from many parents. Parents leave the event feeling empowered to tackle tough issues. One parent stated that she exchanged numbers with other parents and reports that now she has “an instant support group with which to share challenges.” Another parent remarked that the forum “opened up conversations with my child that otherwise I never would have had.” Parents have become extraordinarily supportive of the forum and the *Making a Difference!* program. Some parents have suggested that the *Let’s Talk* forum take place monthly while others have suggested extra implementation sites for *Making a Difference!*. In fact, a few parents even helped to establish new *Making a Difference!* sites at their faith-based organizations and community groups after participation in the forum.

Southeast Mississippi Rural Health Initiative is proud of their students, staff, and parental involvement alike. In the future, they plan to expand to more locations and to build on their curriculum and services. The organization is excited that their programs have been an agent of change in their community by getting people to talk about teen pregnancy and adolescent health.

### Contact Information

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<sup>1</sup> Mississippi State Department of Health. (2012). *Reported Cases and Rates of Chlamydia by District and County: Mississippi, 2008-2012*.

<sup>2</sup> Women's Fund of Mississippi. *Impact of teen births on child poverty in Mississippi*. Retrieved August 11, 2014, from [http://www.womensfoundationms.org/documents/WomensFund\\_Issue\\_Brief\\_Embargoed\\_BW.pdf](http://www.womensfoundationms.org/documents/WomensFund_Issue_Brief_Embargoed_BW.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Albert, B. (2012). *With one voice, 2012: America's adults and teens sound off about teen pregnancy*. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Retrieved July 23, 2014, from [http://thenationalcampaign.org/sites/default/files/resource-primary-download/wov\\_2012.pdf](http://thenationalcampaign.org/sites/default/files/resource-primary-download/wov_2012.pdf)