

Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) Podcast Series

Telling Your Story: How to Frame Your Messages about Adolescent Health Disparities and Teen Pregnancy

DEBORAH ROSE, OAH: Welcome to the Office of Adolescent Health Podcast Series. This podcast is entitled *Telling Your Story*. Today we will be speaking with Glynis Shea, Communications Director at the Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health on how to frame our messages about adolescent health disparities and teen pregnancy prevention. Ms. Shea is a former advertising executive and has been working with the youth-serving community for the past 12 years. At the University of Minnesota, Ms. Shea is part of the “Healthy Youth Development * Prevention Research Center” (funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and the “State Adolescent Health Resource Center” funded by HRSA/MCHB. Ms. Shea, what are some key points organizations should keep in mind when developing effective communications related to adolescent health?

GLYNIS SHEA: Well, the most important thing to remember when discussing disparities is that the data – by itself – is not a compelling reason for action. While we might think that higher rates of teen pregnancy in communities of color demands attention and resources, other audiences “hear” that data differently. So, instead of making our messages all about data points we need to give your audience a reason to care by focusing first on overall community benefits.

DEBORAH ROSE, OAH: What is framing and how can organizations use this concept to develop the right messaging?

GLYNIS SHEA: Framing is a popular communications theory and honestly, it’s the reason that advertising works. There are whole chapters dedicated to it in text books, but the definition I regularly use was from Wikipedia. It reads: According to many psychologists, linguists and cognitive scientists frames are mental structures that are used to facilitate the thinking process. We use frames to provide categories and a structure to our thoughts. Now, the clue here is that framing is something that happens in your brain – a “mental shortcut” if you will. In my own words, I’d say that a “frame” is basically what’s in your head that drives how you think and react to something. And then the process of “Framing” is structuring what you say and how you say it to best work with what is already in someone’s head. And of course, we are always being framed! Every mediated message – news stories, advertising, politicians and press releases – all of those messages frame information.

One of the most basic framing strategies is to always start your message by talking about shared beliefs, benefits or values. Basically, why should your audience care? Of course, that’s not how most of us do it. Think about how you introduce yourself. I would say something like – “My name is Glynis Shea and I work on teen pregnancy prevention...” so if the person I am

talking to doesn't care about teen pregnancy prevention, they're probably not going to care about me! Or worse yet, if they have some negative perceptions about teenagers it's likely that by talking about teen pregnancy first, I've already triggered a mental shortcut that probably isn't going to work in my favor.

DEBORAH ROSE, OAH: Can you give us an example of how organizations have used framing to get their messages across?

GLYNIS SHEA: I love this line from the Oregon Sexual Health plan: *“Sexual health is connected to overall community well-being.”* There's a reason to care for you. And wouldn't it be great to have some data that shows the link? You know, a good example is back in the 90's there was research that documented all the costs associated with teen pregnancy. Talking about what teen pregnancy “costs” the community certainly is a reason to care that taps into our values – but sadly, it also makes young people and their behavior the primary concern. So how do you use this compelling community benefit and not make it all about bad kids? Our friends at the Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy found a brilliant solution. Instead of talking about what teen pregnancy “costs” they talked about how investing in teen pregnancy prevention “saves” taxpayer money. Here's the language they used, *“Investment in teen pregnancy prevention led to a 41% decline in Massachusetts' teen birth rate, saving tax payers \$144 million in one year alone!”*

DEBORAH ROSE, OAH: What else should adolescent health focused organizations think about when framing their work?

GLYNIS SHEA: Avoid crisis messages! Touting the fact that we have a “teen pregnancy epidemic” is overwhelming and NOT motivating. It is important to develop messaging that presents solutions and focuses on what is currently working. This strategy aligns perfectly with the current programmatic focus on “proven programs!” Be sure to emphasize that when you talk about what you do. If you can, try to reference your community's ingenuity and can-do spirit. Again, these ideas tap into core American values that we all share.

DEBORAH ROSE, OAH: What other factors should organizations think about when framing messages with gaining broader community support?

GLYNIS SHEA: It's sad but true that most people do not look favorably on adolescents. So when we talk about the health of young people, the immediate mental shortcut is that the problem is teenagers behaving badly. And while young people certainly are accountable and responsible for their actions, they do not exist in a vacuum. There's a whole world of influences out there! There are environments that can either support young people's efforts to be healthy or create roadblocks. That's what we should be talking about! Whenever possible, we should get our community to think about how external factors, systems, structural components, environmental forces – how all those things impact young people. Instead of making the

conversation about teen pregnancy rates *let's talk about the presence or absence of policies, programs and resources that support young people to make healthy choices*

DEBORAH ROSE, OAH: Thank you for joining us for today's podcast on *Telling Your Story*. To access more resources related to Adolescent Health and teen pregnancy, please visit the Office of Adolescent Health at <http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/>.