Strategies for recruiting and retaining participants in prevention programs

WHAT WORKS, WISCONSIN – RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SERIES

Recruiting and retaining youth and families in prevention programs can sometimes be difficult. Poor recruitment and retention can undermine the success of even the strongest program; programs cannot have a favorable impact if people don't participate. The scientific literature on youth and family programs suggests multiple reasons for these challenges, as well as strategies for more successful recruitment and retention. Some of these obstacles and strategies have greater relevance for audiences from particular cultural backgrounds, social classes, or geographic locations, but the majority of them are appropriate across populations and communities.

Obstacles to program participation

There are a number of reasons why it can be difficult to get youth and families to commit to programs and to stay involved over time. First, it is important to consider that youth and families often have competing demands on their time and energy. For example, parents may work jobs with inflexible hours, and youth may work after-school jobs and/or be involved in extra-curricular activities. Attending group sessions as a family or individually once a week for several months may seem like an impossible commitment to some. Another reason often cited is differences in cultural backgrounds between program participants and program staff. As one example, given this nation's history of racial discrimination, some ethnic minority groups may distrust program staff and the "White," mainstream establishments they represent. Similarly, practitioners working with immigrant families may find that recruitment is difficult when individuals are fearful of either having their residency status revoked or putting themselves in situations that might reveal undocumented immigration.

Other obstacles to program attendance can result from accessibility. In both rural and urban areas, reliable transportation is often a necessity for participants to make it to the program site. Rural areas are unlikely to have good public transportation, while some urban areas are unsafe for walking or using public transportation after dark. Others report that keeping participants in programs over time can prove very difficult if families change residences often, a situation more common in families that have lower incomes or have recently immigrated.

Strategies for recruitment and retention

The scientific literature provides suggestions for successfully recruiting and retaining youth and families in prevention programs. As with the obstacles listed above, some of these strategies will be more appropriate than others for your situation and your target audience. It is important to note that many of these strategies have not been evaluated to the degree that evidence-based programs have, but are simply based on the best knowledge currently available. These recommendations draw from a number of published studies and reviews, which are included in the sources listed at the end of this publication.

◆ **Involve members of the targeted population and the local community in program planning, including selection, recruitment, and implementation.** Programs are more appealing when potential participants and community members serve on the program planning and advisory boards. Their local knowledge can assist in important decisions; without the aid of such local knowledge, programs are unlikely to recruit and retain many participants. This strategy also works to establish and maintain trust because it demonstrates that program staff are committed to the community. Furthermore, when community members recruit youth and families and assist in program implementation, participation rates are generally higher. This strategy is particularly likely to work if respected community elders or other leaders work to recruit and retain parents and families.

◆ **Link the program to a trusted and respected institution or individual already known to potential participants.** This practice can boost recruitment rates and can also aid retention if the institution or individual continues to promote the program. For example, programs may ask a school principal or church leader to send a letter inviting families to participate. The individual or organization should be one that is well-respected and trusted by the audience of interest.

◆ **Strategically choose the site where the program will be held.** Ideally, programs are implemented in locations where potential participants already visit frequently and feel comfortable such as day care centers, schools, work sites, and recreational centers. Whenever possible the site should be both familiar and close to participants' homes. In addition, urban program sites should be centrally located in an area where families feel safe walking if they have no other transportation.

◆ **Involve additional family members and other support networks.** Families and other support networks that encourage program participation are essential when engaging and retaining people in programs. Without this support, youth and their families may be unable or unwilling to participate in program activities. For example, program practitioners may find value in gaining the approval, if not participation, of fathers and/or grandparents in programs traditionally aimed at mothers and children.

◆ **Hire and train culturally sensitive individuals to recruit participants and implement programs.** Regardless of their ethnic or cultural background, staff members need to be able to establish rapport with participants, gain trust, relate well to others, and remain nonjudgmental. Research suggests that these interpersonal skills are more essential than matching staff and participants based on race or ethnicity. However, matching participants and program staff on cultural and ethnic similarities can facilitate recruitment of youth and their families. In addition, this type of matching may facilitate the development of trusting relationships between participants and program staff, which can ease program delivery and help keep participants in the program.

◆ **Provide for basic needs and give participation incentives.** Refreshments, transportation, and quality child care make it easier for participants to attend a program. In addition, providing even small tokens of appreciation can assist retention efforts. Program implementers should consult with potential participants and "local experts" to determine appropriate incentives for the audience of interest. If practitioners collect evaluation data, they should provide additional compensation, especially when evaluation procedures might be perceived as unpleasant, intrusive, or time-consuming.

◆ **Be flexible in scheduling.** Families may prefer home visits or meetings on weekday evenings or weekends. If families and individuals are to continue coming to a program, allowances must be made for scheduling outside of "traditional" working hours. Offering make-up sessions for group-based programs can increase the number of sessions participants attend. In addition, program staff should respect participants' commitments to their families, schools, and communities, and avoid scheduling program activities that will force participants to choose between commitments.

◆ **Make frequent contact.** Between face-to-face meetings, retention can be increased by staying in touch by mail, e-mail, or phone. For example, if the program runs for a significant length of time, sending birthday or holiday cards can help participants stay connected to the program. Calling the day before a meeting can remind them of the session and increase participation. Also, placing phone calls after missed sessions lets participants know that their presence is valued and missed by other group members. If participants are likely to move during the course of the program, it is essential to keep contact information for multiple people close to each participant. Staff should confirm this contact information on a regular basis, as long as the process does not intimidate participants.

◆ **Make every effort to maintain staff members throughout program implementation.** Retention rates are higher when participants interact with the same staff members throughout the course of the program. High staff turnover means there is little continuity in the relationships between staff members and program participants. Good relationships are critical not only for participant retention, but also the overall success of the program. Staff hired to facilitate a program or otherwise work directly with participants should be asked to commit to the length of the program. If a program facilitator or other staff member does leave his or her job in the midst of a program, efforts should be made to smooth the transition. For example, the original facilitator could announce his or her departure and introduce the new facilitator to program participants.

◆ **Keep promises.** Program staff should always keep appointments, follow procedures as they were explained, and follow through on promises, especially related to compensation or incentives for participants. This strategy is essential for maintaining trust within communities and retaining participants in programs.

◆ **Help potential participants to see the program as worthwhile.** When youth and their families believe that a program is worthwhile, they are more likely to participate and stay in the program to the end. Marketing the program with the assistance of community members can help to reduce the stigma sometimes associated with prevention programs. In addition, many communities have found it beneficial to frame program participation as "health promotion" or "positive youth dev-elopment" rather than focusing on reducing the risk for negative outcomes. Furthermore, ensuring that a program really is worth participants' time and effort is probably the greatest incentive a program can offer. This strategy may require adapting the program to fit specific needs in the local community. For example, program implementers can add relevant discussions to the curriculum on topics such as coping with discrimination, dealing with job loss, or overcoming social isolation.

In sum, while it can be difficult to recruit and retain participants in prevention programs, an emerging literature is beginning to provide some practical suggestions for addressing this issue. Practitioners who wish to increase their chances of success can benefit by incorporating these strategies into current protocol.

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