Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment and retention of youth and parents is critical to the success of abstinence education projects. Developing and executing a recruitment plan takes time, patience and perseverance. This tip sheet describes what to consider when developing a recruitment and retention plan and how to ensure success.

Developing Your Recruitment and Retention Plan: Understand Your Target Audience

Think about the motivations of your target audience for participating in your project and barriers they might encounter. This will help you effectively market your project and plan for potential recruitment and retention challenges.

Identify your audience’s needs that your project may address. Consider the following:

- Do youth want to learn about how to negotiate dating or relationships?
- Are youth or their parents interested in educational or career planning?
- Are parents motivated by learning how to talk with youth about mutually faithful, monogamous relationship in the context of marriage?
- Have youth been exposed to trauma and do they need trauma-informed services?

Consider potential barriers to recruiting youth, which may include competing extracurricular or job activities, classes, or family responsibilities; lack of interest in or comfort with the project material; perceived stigma from participating; and lack of transportation to project activities.

Similar challenges are involved in retaining youth. Additional retention challenges may include schedule conflicts, lack of connection with the facilitator or group, or working through trauma that may be triggered by the contents of the program.

Projects that require parental consent for youth participation or involve parents directly in activities must address barriers to recruiting parents, such as mistrust of project content, perceived lack of benefit to them or their child, language or reading level barriers, and competing family or job commitments.

Create a Recruitment Package

Depending on the populations you are serving and the locales of the services, you may need to develop more than one set of recruitment materials. Although the content of the recruitment materials will be similar, packages should be tailored to best fit each audience by adjusting the language to the specific group.

Recruitment may be a sequential process, involving schools, then teachers, then parents and students. Allow sufficient time to distribute the materials; conduct follow-up phone calls and visits or send email messages; and answer any questions and concerns.

What to include in a recruitment package?
Your initial recruitment package should contain the following materials:

- concise one-page recruitment letter;
• one-page project fact sheet, project brochure, or Q&A sheet;
• one-page description of benefits of participation, such as addressing broad aspects of youths' social-emotional well-being or teaching students skills and tactics to resist peer pressure to engage in risky behaviors; and
• contact information, including a project person’s name, and both telephone numbers and email.

Other helpful materials that can be included:
• parental consent form/student assent form; and
• Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) (for schools or other partner organizations).

How to develop materials for a recruitment package?
• Write materials at the reading level and in the language of the intended audience.
• Use graphics, color, and different fonts to make them visually appealing.
• Provide in multiple formats, including mailed hard copies, e-mail or website postings.

Tips for Recruitment and Retention Success

Recruitment
• **Get youth buy-in.** Other youth speaking highly of your project can lend legitimacy to your project. Consider developing a participant referral system that rewards youth who recruit others into the project. This type of recruiting may also help with fostering peer support of decisions to delay sexual activity during program implementation.
• **Create social media accounts for your project.** Social media offer greater access to youth than some traditional venues and can accelerate informal referrals of youth by youth.
• **Incentives encourage youth recruitment.** Offer snacks at project sessions, if approved by your project officer; raffle prizes, such as gift cards to movie theaters, local restaurants, and concerts; free homework passes if your project is school-based; school store vouchers; items with the project logo, such as water bottles, t-shirts, backpacks, etc.
• **Help provide transportation.** Providing transportation or support through gas cards or bus fare cards can help participants who lack personal transportation attend sessions.
• **Be flexible with your recruitment methods over time.** What works for one cohort of youth may not work for the next group.

Additional Retention Tips
• **Create a warm environment.** It is essential for your project to offer youth a welcoming, nurturing environment where they feel respected, valued, and empowered and for it to be culturally sensitive to racial/ethnic differences and life experiences, such as poverty.
• **Offer empowering opportunities for youth.** Have youth lead a session and/or participate in individual and creative activities. If your program does not explicitly allow this, check with your project officer or program developer about whether this might be an adaptation requiring review and approval. Consider offering opportunities for youth to engage in real-life experiences that build workplace, self-sufficiency, and life skills (e.g., leading a community service learning project).
• **Solicit feedback from youth and parents.** Using their feedback to improve the program could increase their satisfaction with your project and strengthen overall retention.
• **Reward good attendance with tangible and non-tangible incentives.** At program completion, offer a celebration for youth who remained in the program.\(^{13}\)

**References**


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