
A Media-Based AIDS Curriculum for At-Risk Teens

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A. General Scientific and Technological Aims

The objectives in Phase I were to design, produce, and test prototype materials for a media-based AIDS prevention curriculum for teenagers. NWM's interest in this project stemmed from the urgent concerns about the spread of AIDS among teenagers and appeals by AIDS researchers and educators for more relevant materials and activities.

We now know that the threat of AIDS is universal. The tightly held belief that AIDS is a disease that affects only certain groups, such as homosexuals or IV drug users, is denied by alarming increases in the incidence of HIV infection among young adult heterosexuals. In spite of the evidence, the life-threatening nature of the disease, and the proliferation of information, adolescents continue to perceive themselves as exempt from the disease and to persist in high-risk sexual behaviors.

There are compelling reasons why it is especially difficult to impress teenagers with the grim realities of AIDS. Adolescent development, in some respects, is a formula for *not* listening or acting in response to most messages about AIDS. The onset of puberty heightens feelings about sexuality. A radical process of redefining oneself ensues in which teenagers adamantly disengage from sources of traditional authority and just as adamantly engage the values of peer groups for whom risk and experimentation are the norm. The development of abstract thinking dramatically extends the scope of thought, but also creates a characteristic sense of idealism free from cause and effect.

The situation is further complicated by the stream of messages from the entertainment media that create a sense of unreality about personal responsibility and sexual behavior. Add to this the peculiarities of the disease itself, which has a long, symptom-free incubation period, and the overall picture is frightening: one in which teenagers are simultaneously motivated to engage in sexual activity and to ignore or discount the longer-term cause and effect of high-risk behaviors that can lead to a fatal disease.

The main intent of the project in Phase I, therefore, was to learn how to make a positive and realistic impact on teenagers' perceptions of their risk to HIV infection. Our premise was that increases in perceived vulnerability are an essential precondition for shifting their intentions or involvement in high-risk sexual behaviors.

B. Phase I Research Activities

Product Development

The project took place between October, 1991 and March, 1992. During that time, three interrelated products were developed: *Firehouse*, a film; *Rap Session*, a videotape of a teenage discussion about AIDS; and *Getting Ready*, a teenage newspaper. The materials form the nucleus of an integrated AIDS education curriculum for teenagers.

Firehouse. *Firehouse* is a 10-minute 16mm film about a singular moment in the lives of a close group of four teenagers. The story is told through Angie as she reflects back on the events leading to that moment. The characters consist of two teenage couples, Angie and Paul, and Cory and Rosalie. As the action begins, Rosalie, Paul, and Angie are in their favorite hangout, an abandoned firehouse. They use the space to rehearse with their band, and now are having fun videotaping themselves. The friends begin to express concern over Cory's whereabouts. Cory, seen in their videotapes, is highly personable and athletic. Suddenly, Cory bursts onto the scene in an obvious panic. He demands money from his girlfriend and peremptorily says he has to leave town. His friends are bewildered. They press him for some answers, but Cory evades them. Finally, under pressure to tell, Cory tells them "he has AIDS." The ensuing action depicts the unfolding of their reactions as they desperately try to make sense of what Cory has said. His friends want to know how he got infected. At first he lies. He tells them that he got the infection while shooting drugs. He can't face telling Rosalie about a certain tryst. Rosalie, in the heat of the moment, reveals that she and Paul had slept together once, but insists it didn't mean anything. After emotions cool somewhat, Cory realizes he wants to tell his friends the whole truth. In the last scene, Angie is in her room late that night. She watches the videotapes of her friends and wonders what will happen to them and why it happened. She thinks about how close she came to sleeping with Paul and how that would have changed her life. Her future is filled with uncertainty.

The action and imagery in the film were designed to be candid and relevant for teenagers. The use of 16mm film and high-quality production techniques is consistent with professional entertainment standards. The film touches on the possible causes of HIV transmission and the kinds of pressures that influence risky sexual behaviors. The film contrasts the familiar circumstances of the characters' social lives with the shocking reality of discovering that someone is infected with HIV – someone who is familiar, someone who could be one of the viewers.

Rap Session. The *Rap Session* is a 12-minute videotape that features the actors from *Firehouse*, other teenage discussants, and a young person who has AIDS. The discussion is organized into three sections. In the first section, the discussion concerns how and why teenagers feel they can't get AIDS. The actors also refer to their characters' actions in the film. The second section consists of a young person disclosing that he has AIDS, what it is like for him to live with AIDS, and the discussants' reactions to that disclosure. The final section captures some closing and poignant insights by these teenagers.

The intent of the *Rap Session* was to stimulate a dialogue among teenagers about AIDS-related issues, from behaviors to the politics of AIDS. The participation of the actors serves as a segue between dramatic representation and frank communication that captures teenagers' spontaneous thoughts and feelings. The young person with AIDS

gives a very stark impression of the everyday experience of having AIDS. This was intended to provide a model through whom teenagers could more readily personalize the risks of AIDS.

Getting Ready. *Getting Ready* is a peer-oriented newspaper for teens. It is a monthly publication of NWM that is distributed to 12,000 teenagers across the country. The primary focus is to teach teens how to live independently. The overarching theme of this issue was risk-taking – why people take risks, what happens to them, and how to make rational choices about risks. AIDS, the featured topic, was presented through feature stories, interviews, and factual information reports.

The intent of the newspaper was to introduce the topic of AIDS and sexual behavior in the context of risk-taking. The newspaper uses a tabloid format, graphics and photographs, and true life stories. In addition, the newspaper deals more specifically with factual information about AIDS and, in that regard, serves as a more permanent record of information.

Product Evaluation

Products were evaluated quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative evaluation was based on a questionnaire that measured teenagers' perceptions of their vulnerability to AIDS, administered before and after participating in a focus group. Qualitative evaluation was based on structured reviews of the products during two-hour focus group meetings with teenagers and educators.

Subjects. Twenty teenagers were recruited from the Opportunity Center High School in Eugene, Oregon. The Opportunity Center is an alternative school for students who have a history of social and academic problems. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two focus groups. Fifteen of the original twenty teenagers completed the study, seven females and eight males, 15 to 21 years old. Participants received \$35 for completing project activities.

Seven educators were recruited from the Opportunity Center and the 4J School District to participate in a focus group, four curriculum instructors and three health education specialists. Participants received \$20 for completing project activities.

Procedures. Teenagers participated in two two-hour focus groups. The teenage focus groups were conducted by an independent AIDS youth education specialist. Focus group activities were organized into three clusters: the film, newspaper, and video rap session. Teenagers completed an *AIDS Vulnerability Questionnaire* one week prior to the focus group. In addition, they were given the teenage newspaper to read two days before the focus group. During the focus group, participants first viewed a first version of

the film, then reviewed the newspaper, then viewed the video rap session. Within each cluster, participants discussed the material in terms of 1) its impact on perceptions of vulnerability to AIDS, 2) its impact on knowledge about AIDS, and 3) its production quality.

The PI took notes during the focus group meetings. Following the focus group activity, the PI and education specialist met to validate and summarize participants' comments.

Educators participated in a two-hour focus group. The educator focus group was conducted by a member of the research organization. Activities were organized into three clusters, one for each product. Discussion centered on 1) current AIDS education activities, 2) potential for incorporating products into school activities, 3) production quality.

Measures

An *AIDS Vulnerability Questionnaire (AVQ)* was developed for this study. When this project began there were no validated instruments available that measured the attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of teenagers concerning AIDS. The instruments that were in use were useful in beginning to document what teenagers knew and felt about AIDS. However, the instruments focused mostly on knowledge and attitudes that reflected tolerance of others. Relatively few items directly inquired about perceptions of personal vulnerability, and those that did used language that was void of social meaning for teenagers.

The AVQ consists of 14 Likert-type items. Respondents rated how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a scale of 1-4. Items dealt with eight facets of risk perceptions. A scale of five items (Q1, Q4, Q7, Q9, Q10) related to risk perceptions concerning current *social* relationships. Three items (Q5, Q6, Q8) formed a scale of risk perceptions based on knowledge of the *incubation* period of HIV infection. Other single items focused on areas of risk perceptions in which teenagers showed persistent confusion or misinformation. These included: *oral sex* (Q2), *homosexuality* (Q3), *number of sex partners* (Q11), and *treatment* (Q12). Two other items asked about the value of receiving *information* (Q13) and personal levels of *concern* (Q14). Ratings for items were randomly inverted so that higher vulnerability ratings corresponded to either agreeing or disagreeing with statements. In addition to scores for each scale, the measure yielded a total score of perceived vulnerability.

Teenage Focus Group Results: Qualitative Assessment. Participants were eager to respond to all materials and to discuss AIDS-related issues. Teenagers felt that the situation in the film was realistic, unpretentious, and to the point. They felt the film made the threat of AIDS more relevant for them, especially since it portrayed a close-knit group of friends that were heterosexual. Most felt that their interest in the film was relatively low

in the beginning and increased after Cory's disclosure. Also, there was some confusion about references to physical symptoms that Cory made during his disclosure.

Most participants had read at least part of the newspaper. They were most impressed by the true-life AIDS interviews. They felt that the illustrations were attractive and that they learned some new facts about AIDS through the newspaper. Some felt that they would have been more likely to pick up the paper if AIDS were featured on the front cover. Students wanted to see more stories from a female perspective.

Participants felt that the *Rap Session* video was realistic and helped "bring things out in the film more." They enjoyed the informality of the setting. They were particularly impressed by Jake's disclosure that he had AIDS and seemed taken aback by the description of the mundane horror of what it is like to actually have the disease. Participants wanted to hear more about Jake but felt that some of the other parts of the discussion were repetitive.

Educator Focus Group Results: Qualitative Assessment. Educators reported widely varying levels of activity concerning current AIDS education. Virtually all of the AIDS education was done by health education teachers. Curriculum teachers reported that their activities consisted of frequent informal communications with students. Those involved with AIDS education said they continually search for new and updated materials. Participants felt strongly that the film was relevant and realistic. They felt that the film would be an ideal way to engage student participation in AIDS education classes. Educators agreed that the beginning was slow moving, and they were concerned about references made in the film to symptoms.

The curriculum teachers at the Opportunity Center expressed some doubts about whether their students do *any* reading. They felt that structured reading assignments and additional worksheets would be necessary, but that under those circumstances the material was relevant. Most felt that they would use reprints of single articles, especially the interviews of people with AIDS.

Educators agreed that the video *Rap Session* was a powerful adjunct to the film. They especially appreciated that the discussion was not "preachy" or didactic, and felt that it would stimulate discussion among teenage viewers.

Teenage Focus Group: Quantitative Assessment. Alpha levels of up to .10 were used to report significance because of the exploratory nature of the study and the small number of cases.

The data in Table 1 show that level of perceived vulnerability across all items significantly increased after viewing and discussing the materials, $t(14) = 1.92, p < .10$. Subjects' *social* perceptions of risk significantly increased from pre- to posttest, $t(14) = 2.24, p < .05$. Subjects also showed significant increases in perceived vulnerability in

relation to having *oral sex*, $t(14) = 2.42, p < .05$. Although the overall *incubation* scale did not yield significant changes, one item (Q6) concerning the potential for infection over longer periods of time, was significantly higher on the posttest, $t(14) = 2.26, p < .05$.

Gender differences in perceived vulnerability were also examined. Until recently, heterosexual females were not considered a high-risk group for AIDS. Attitudes among females have reflected that. In a recent study (Moore & Rosenthal, 1991), sexually active females saw themselves as less at risk than their male counterparts. Our results, however, showed that females felt significantly more vulnerable than males overall, $t(13) = 2.58, p < .05$ ($M = 105.14, SD = 3.93$ and $M = 97.13, SD = 7.34$, respectively).

Discussion of Results from Phase I. The evaluation activities in Phase I tested the feasibility of an integrated set of media materials designed to increase teenagers' perceived vulnerability to the AIDS virus. The perception of personal risk is considered to be a critical determinant for motivating changes in high-risk health behaviors.

The qualitative results from the focus groups showed that the materials specifically engaged teenagers' thoughts and feelings about their risk to AIDS. The materials served as powerful catalysts for frank and meaningful discussion about AIDS-related beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors. Educators confirmed this. Educators viewed the materials as uniquely suited for use with teenagers. They felt that the fluid and realistic social depictions were images that "capture thousands of words." Health educators said that the materials could be and should be incorporated into a curriculum that included a broader range of topics and skills building, especially communication and decision-making.

The focus groups pointed to some weaknesses in the materials. The groups generally felt that the real impact of the film started after Cory's disclosure and that too much time was spent in the early development of the story. Also, in the original script, Cory complains about a sore throat. The writer's intent was to show Cory evading disclosure. Instead, viewers wondered what the symptom had to do with having the virus. We felt that these criticisms were valid and reedited the film so that the beginning action moves faster and the references to a sore throat were deleted.

The results from the AVQ revealed that, following a brief intervention in which teenagers viewed and discussed the materials, their sense of risk to the AIDS virus increased. The impact was both global and in relation to specific areas. One such area was social relationships. Teenagers' decisions are often made spontaneously and in the context of compelling social factors. Questions from the *Social* scale asked teenagers to evaluate their perceptions of risk while considering some of these factors, such as close friendships and intimate relationships. Increased perception of vulnerability in this area was important since it coincided with the main intent of the film – to portray the spread of HIV among a close group of friends. Teenagers also seemed to better understand the

longer-term viability of the infection. This was probably the result of increased information as well as a response to the dramatic depictions of the consequences of actions over time. Finally, teenagers felt more at risk about oral sex. Previous research has shown that there is persistent confusion among teenagers about the risks of AIDS through oral sex.

An unexpected finding of the study was the high levels of perceived vulnerability to the AIDS virus among females. Although this was not a specific intent of the present intervention, it showed the importance of providing males and females with relevant social skills to alter high-risk sexual behaviors.

The study in Phase I was exploratory in nature. The measure represented an attempt to provide some contextual relevance for teenagers. Teenagers' risk perceptions in relation to multiple partners, aspects of the incubation period of the disease, and their personal concern about AIDS were not significantly altered. Little is known about the relationship between increases in risk perceptions and actual behaviors over extended periods of time. However, overall, the results were very encouraging. Important aspects of vulnerability were impacted with teenagers that were primarily heterosexual, sexually active, socially alienated, and at high risk of drug use. The results of Phase I indicated that the materials and activities provided a viable format for teenage AIDS education and a strong premise for building skills that can effect behavioral changes.