
**Media-Based Instruction for Foster Teens:
Building Life Skills for the Real World**

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Phase I Final Report
A Small Business Innovation Research Grant
from the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development
Project #R43 HD30649-01

to

Northwest Media, Inc.
326 West 12th Avenue
Eugene, OR 97401

This report is an unpublished manuscript submitted in fulfillment
of completing the above project.

A. General Scientific and Technological Aims

The overall aim in Phase I was to develop and test the first unit of instruction of a proposed comprehensive curriculum on independent living skills for foster teenagers. The topic for the first unit was finding a place to live. Instructional activities combined video, hands-on materials, discussion, and role-playing. In Phase I, independent living specialists implemented the instruction in small groups of foster teenagers and their foster parents.

An integrated set of materials were proposed for Phase I:

- 1) A video depicting key facets of finding an apartment.
- 2) A curriculum guide for the instructional unit.
- 3) A set of supportive instructional materials.

An evaluation study was conducted to assess the impact of instruction on foster teenagers' knowledge of, confidence and comfort in finding a place to live, and foster parents' confidence and comfort in helping their foster teenager find a place to live.

B. Phase I Research Activities

Videotaped Vignettes

The videotaped story developed in Phase I, titled *The Apartment Hunt*, is designed to acquaint foster teenagers with the basic steps involved in renting an apartment. The video presents specific skills and information about finding an apartment through a dramatized story about a group of teenage friends. The group of six includes one male and one female foster teenager. This particular group configuration provides a premise for presenting issues that are relevant to foster teenagers without exaggerating the focus. The video uses contemporary features of teenage culture (social situations, images and language) to enhance the appeal of instruction to foster teenagers.

Story narration, given by one of the story's main character, Bruno, provides the viewer with background information and focuses attention on aspects of the apartment hunting process. These include:

- choosing roommates,
- assessing needs and wants,
- searching for a rental apartment,
- talking to and negotiating with the landlord,
- gathering and organizing personal information for the rental application, and
- understanding the basics of a lease.

Social skills and issues are well-integrated into the story characters' practical experiences. Personal presentation, communication, dealing with rejection, and the particular issues that are important to foster teenagers are blended into the context of the story actions.

The 30-minute video, *The Apartment Hunt*, is submitted as Appendix A.. The story is divided into two 15-minute parts. One part is shown in each of two corresponding 90-

minute class sessions. The following is a synopsis of the action in each part.

The characters in the story are Stella, Reina, Dee Dee, Buzz, Bruno, and Jake.

The Apartment Hunt: Part 1. Six teens find out that the apartment they've been using for band practice is now off limits. Buzz says they should look for a new place to rent where they can live and practice together. They all think finding their own place is a great idea, but the girls decide that they and the guys should split up and look for two separate apartments. The girls meet at a coffee shop and write a "needs and wants" list. They discuss how much rent they can afford, how much room they need, and what part of town they want to live in. Stella and Reina fantasize about how it'll be to live in their own place. The guys meet at the garage where Buzz works. They check the classified pages for rentals and make a few phone calls. They discover that prices are higher than they expected.

Dee Dee checks in with her independent living counselor who suggests ways for her to expand her apartment search: check the bulletin boards in neighborhoods she likes, network with people who might be able to help, and check in with a property management service.

The guys and girls get together at Stella's house for a game of pool and discuss their apartment search strategies. The girls call a property management service and learn that they have to fill out a rental application and get references. The guys decide not to use a property management service. They want to use a less "official" approach) search the classified ads and bulletin boards.

The girls meet with Ms. Gonzales from the property management office to fill out an application. She tells them they have to pay a non-refundable \$25 application fee. The guys check the neighborhood grocery bulletin board and start making calls. Buzz meets with a landlord and gets brushed off. Ms. Gonzales helps the girls figure out how much rent they can afford. She tells them they'll need previous rental references or co-signers. The girls ask to take the application home to fill it out.

The Apartment Hunt: Part 2. Bruno gets dressed up and checks out an apartment. The landlady asks if he and his roommates have steady jobs. Bruno, exuding confidence, assures her they are all employed.

The girls fill out their rental application forms. Reina asks her dad to co-sign for her. Dee Dee gets advice from her independent living counselor.

Dee Dee and Jake talk over their concerns about leaving foster care and living independently. Later, Buzz calls Dee Dee for a date.

Bruno takes Buzz and Jake to see the apartment he hopes to rent. When they talk about the lease with the landlord they realize she wants quiet tenants. It won't work for them. The guys check out another place) it's a dump. They tell the slumlord they don't want the apartment.

The girls meet back at the coffee shop and make a list showing the pros and cons of each place they've looked at. The guys revisit the grocery store bulletin board and find an ad for a warehouse apartment to share with the current tenant. They visit the apartment and meet Pablo, who says he'll share the place with them. Buzz says they need a place for the band to practice. Pablo agrees and asks if it's okay for him to play his trumpet at their rehearsals.

The girls meet with the property manager to sign and go over the main points of the lease. They shop for furniture, move in and have their first disagreement. The six teens meet at the guys' apartment to celebrate their success with a pizza party and band practice. Buzz is shocked to learn that Bruno and Dee Dee are dating. To try to comfort him, Pablo attempts to play a serenade on the trumpet.

The video ends with a rap song that Bruno performs about their apartment hunting experiences.

Curriculum Activities

The curriculum delivered in Phase I took place in two 90-minute sessions. An independent living coordinator worked with small groups of foster teenagers and their foster parents. Instruction included viewing the video, discussion, hands-on activity with class materials, and role-play. The following is a brief description of the instructional activities. The complete curriculum guide and handouts are contained in Appendix B.

Class One

Teens review their current understanding of what "renting" means. Everyone then watches the first part of *The Apartment Hunt* and discusses the characters' actions related to choice of roommates, apartment needs and wants, search strategies, and personal presentation. Parents and teens then learn how to read and evaluate apartment rental ads in a classified advertising section. Using a simulated classified ad section, the group tries to match the needs and wants of the story characters to the offerings in the newspaper. Following that, parents and teens role-play interviews between prospective tenants and apartment landlords. In the activity, teens select cards with questions about one of three prospective apartments listed in the classified ad section. The questions are probes for more information about the apartments. Parents and other teens role-play the apartment landlords. The landlords have answer sheets with specific answers to the questions. Prospective tenants and landlords also can invent questions and answers. At the close of the session, parents and teens are given *Info Cards* to fill out at home. The cards are designed to help them organize and document information that would be pertinent for filling out a rental application.

Class Two

The class reviews the activities in Class 1 and the first part of video. Everyone then watches the second part of *The Apartment Hunt* and discusses the characters' actions related to personal presentation, inspecting an apartment, tenant-landlord rights, and living with others. In the next activity, teens and parents are given a rental application to complete. They can use either personal information on the *Info Card* they filled out since the last session, or mock information from a fictional person. Participants discuss what a rental application is, why it's needed, and how to deal with demands for information. The class then studies a sample lease

Project Evaluation

Subjects

Subjects included 45 pairs of foster teenagers and foster parents who were currently living together. Parents and teenagers were recruited in Riverside County, California (n = 25) and Lane County, Oregon (n = 20). Subjects were randomly assigned to either an intervention or a control condition. There were 23 foster teenagers in the intervention condition) 14 females and 9 males; and 22 foster teenagers in the control group) 12 females and 10 males. There were 13 female and 10 foster fathers in the intervention group; and 12 female and 10 foster mothers in the control group. Parents and teenagers included a diversity of ethnicity in each group, as follows:

Foster teenagers were between 16 and 18 years of age ($M = 16.6$ years). Age was equivalent for condition (intervention: $M = 16.7$ years; control: $M = 16.5$ years) and gender (females: $M = 16.6$ years; males: $M = 16.6$ years).

Procedure

Foster parents and teenagers assigned to the control condition received no instruction. Those assigned to the intervention condition received the curriculum described above. Subjects in the intervention condition were divided into four groups of five or six foster teenager-parent pairs. Each instruction group met for two 90-minute sessions, one week apart.

Subjects in the intervention condition completed an assessment battery just prior to the first session, and again just after completing the second session. Subjects in the control condition completed the same assessment battery over a one-week interval.

Measures

The assessment battery included five measures administered to all subjects and an evaluation questionnaire administered to subjects in the intervention group. Appendix C contains a copy of each of the measures.

- 1) *Apartment-Hunting Skills* (AHS). This questionnaire, titled *Apartment Hunting: What's Up?* in Appendix C, measured foster teenagers' knowledge of apartment-hunting skills. It included 20 multiple-choice questions about choosing roommates, using the classified ad section, understanding leases and rental applications, budgeting, tenant and landlord rights, and inspecting an apartment. The AHS expanded upon the general format and content of the *Independent Living Assessment for Life Skills* (Bishop, Foster, Kuchan, & Rushing, 1989). Scores were the total number of correct answers.
- 2) *Confidence in Apartment Hunting* (CAH). This measure, included under the title *Apartment Hunting: It's up to Me* in Appendix C, is a 12-item rating scale. Foster teenagers rated their confidence in choosing roommates, using the classified ad section, understanding leases and rental applications, budgeting, tenant and landlord rights, and inspecting an apartment. Ratings ranged from 1 to 5, extremely confident, to not confident, respectively. Thus, lower scores represent *higher* levels

- of confidence. Scores were the mean rating for the 12 items.
- 3) *Comfort with Foster Parents and Counselors* (CFPC). This measure, also included under *Apartment Hunting: It's up to Me* in Appendix C, is a 2-item rating scale. Foster teenagers rated their comfort with talking to their parents and counselors about moving out. Ratings ranged from 1 to 5, extremely comfortable, to not comfortable, respectively. Thus, lower scores represent *higher* levels of comfort. Scores were the mean rating for both items.
 - 4) *Confidence in Helping with Apartment Hunting* (CHAH). This measure, included under the title *Apartment Hunting: The Scene with Your Foster Teen* in Appendix C, is a 12-item rating scale. Foster parents rated their confidence in helping their foster teenager with choosing roommates, using the classified ad section, understanding leases and rental applications, budgeting, tenant and landlord rights, and inspecting an apartment. Ratings ranged from 1 to 5, extremely confident, to not confident, respectively. Thus, lower scores represent *higher* levels of confidence. Scores were the mean rating for the 12 items.
 - 5) *Comfort with Foster Teenagers Moving* (CFTM). This measure, also included under *Apartment Hunting: The Scene with Your Foster Teen* in Appendix C, is a 4-item rating scale. Foster parents rated their comfort with helping their teenager with finding a place to live. Ratings ranged from 1 to 5, extremely comfortable, to not comfortable, respectively. Thus, lower scores represent *higher* levels of comfort. Scores were the mean rating for the four items.

Hypotheses

Foster teenagers in the intervention condition, when compared with the control condition, were expected to show greater improvements in knowledge on apartment hunting skills, and greater changes in confidence and comfort associated with finding a place to live. Foster parents in the intervention condition, when compared with the control condition, were expected to show greater changes in confidence and comfort associated with helping their foster teenager find a place to live. The following specific hypotheses were tested:

- a) Foster teenagers in the intervention condition were expected to show increases in *Apartment-Hunting Skills* scores from pre- to post-intervention compared with foster teenagers in the control condition.
- b) Foster teenagers in the intervention condition were expected to show decreases in *Confidence in Apartment Hunting* scores from pre- to post-intervention compared with foster teenagers in the control condition.
- c) Foster teenagers in the intervention condition were expected to show decreases in *Comfort with Foster Parents and Counselors* scores from pre- to post-intervention compared with foster teenagers in the control condition.
- d) Foster parents in the intervention condition were expected to show decreases in *Confidence in Helping with Apartment Hunting* scores from pre- to post-intervention compared with foster parents in the control condition.
- e) Foster parents in the intervention condition were expected to show decreases in *Comfort with Foster Teenagers Moving* scores from pre- to post-intervention

compared with foster parents in the control condition.

Results

Preliminary analyses were conducted to test for baseline equivalence between subjects in the intervention and control condition. No significant group differences were found in baseline measures of foster teenager knowledge, confidence, or comfort, and foster parent confidence or comfort.

Analyses also were conducted to test for baseline equivalence between subjects in the two test sites) Riverside, California, and Eugene, Oregon. Teenagers' confidence was significantly greater at baseline in Riverside than in Eugene, $t(43) = 3.36$, $p < .01$ ($M = 2.44$, $SD = .68$ vs. $M = 3.26$, $SD = .96$, respectively). Teenagers' comfort also was significantly greater at baseline in Riverside than in Eugene, $t(43) = 2.01$, $p < .05$ ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .68$ vs. $M = 1.98$, respectively). Higher levels of confidence and comfort for the group in Riverside may indicate a sense of greater familiarity with apartment living among urban teenagers. However, this was not reflected in their knowledge at baseline. There were no significant differences for test site in teenagers' knowledge, parent confidence, and parent comfort.

Two teenagers) both in the intervention condition) had previously rented an apartment. Teenagers in the intervention condition who had rented before felt more confident than those who had not, $t(21) = 2.66$, $p < .01$ ($M = 1.21$, $SD = .84$ vs. $M = 2.83$, $SD = .06$, respectively). However, whether teenagers had previously rented made no difference in their knowledge scores at baseline.

Apartment-Hunting Skills.

A 2 (Pre- and Post-assessment) x 2 (Group) repeated measures ANOVA was used to test for differences in teenagers' AHS scores. There was a significant main effect for group $F(1,43) = 8.30$, $p < .01$; and pre-to-post assessment $F(1,43) = 7.02$, $p < .01$. A significant interaction effect showed that, as predicted, improvements in teenagers' knowledge were a function of group $F(1,43) = 30.07$, $p < .001$. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the AHS scores.

Confidence in Apartment Hunting.

A 2 (Pre- and Post-assessment) x 2 (Group) repeated measures ANOVA was used to test for differences in teenagers' CAH scores. There was a significant main effect for group $F(1,43) = 4.44$, $p < .05$; and pre-to-post assessment $F(1,43) = 36.73$, $p < .001$. A significant interaction effect showed that, as predicted, increases in teenagers' confidence were a function of group $F(1,43) = 29.00$, $p < .001$. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the CAH scores.

Comfort with Foster Parents and Counselors.

A 2 (Pre- and Post-assessment) x 2 (Group) repeated measures ANOVA was used to test for differences in teenagers' CFPC scores. There was no significant main effect for group. There was a significant main effect for pre-to-post assessment $F(1,43) = 36.73$, $p < .001$. A significant interaction effect showed that, as predicted, increases in teenagers' comfort were a function of group $F(1,43) = 29.00$, $p < .001$. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the CFPC scores.

Confidence in Helping with Apartment Hunting.

A 2 (Pre- and Post-assessment) x 2 (Group) repeated measures ANOVA was used to test for differences in parents' CHAH scores. There was no significant main effect for group. There was a significant main effect for pre-to-post assessment $F(1,43) = 28.51, p < .001$. A significant interaction effect showed that, as predicted, increases in parents' confidence were a function of group $F(1,43) = 22.66, p < .001$. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the CHAH scores.

Comfort with Foster Teenagers Moving.

A 2 (Pre- and Post-assessment) x 2 (Group) repeated measures ANOVA was used to test for differences in parents' CFTM scores. There was no significant main effect for group. There was a significant main effect for pre-to-post assessment $F(1,43) = 6.26, p < .05$. A significant interaction effect showed that, as predicted, increases in parents' comfort were a function of group $F(1,43) = 10.20, p < .01$. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the CFTM scores.

Correlations of Dependent Variables. A series of correlations were conducted to explore the relationship between teenagers' knowledge, confidence and comfort. At an alpha level of $p < .10$, the findings showed some trends. Teenagers' knowledge was significantly correlated with their level of confidence at pre-assessment, $r = -.25, p < .10$, and at post-assessment, $r = -.27, p < .10$. Teenagers' level of confidence was significantly correlated with their level of comfort at pre-assessment, $r = .25, p < .10$, and at post-assessment, $r = .55, p < .001$.

Gender Differences. A series of 2 (Gender) x 2 (Pre- and Post-assessment) repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted with outcome variables for subjects in the intervention condition. There were no significant main effects for gender. Females had somewhat higher overall levels of knowledge (females: $M = 16.11, SD = 1.75$; males: $M = 14.33, SD = 3.72$), but were less confident (females: $M = 2.45, SD = .92$; males: $M = 2.23, SD = .77$), and less comfortable (females: $M = 2.27, SD = 1.10$; males: $M = 1.81, SD = .86$).

Ethnic Group Differences. Separate one-way ANOVAs were conducted to test for differences across ethnic groups for each outcome variable. The dependent variables were pre-to-post differences for each outcome score. There were no significant differences for ethnic group for any of the outcome difference scores.

Participant Satisfaction. Teenagers and parents in the intervention condition rated their satisfaction with seven aspects of the instruction: the videotape, the class activities, the hands-on materials, if the class was enjoyable, if they felt the class was helpful, if they would recommend the class to others, and if they wanted classes on other independent living skills. Ratings were from 1 (extremely) to 5 (not at all). The evaluation questionnaire, also titled *The Scoop on the Class*, is included in Appendix C. Table 2 shows that overall, both parents and teenagers rated all aspects of the intervention as

very good (a rating of 2).

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Teenager and Parent Scores by Group and Time of Assessment

	Intervention Condition (n = 23)		Control Condition (n = 22)	
	<u>M</u>	<u>(SD)</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>(SD)</u>
Teenager Knowledge				
Pre	14.30	(2.95)	13.00	(3.90)
Post	16.52	(2.59)	12.23	(3.94)
Difference	2.22			
Teenager Confidence [†]				
Pre	2.68	(.93)	2.93	(.88)
Post	2.04	(.77)	2.89	(.96)
Difference	-.64		-.04	
Teenager Comfort [†]				
Pre	2.43	(1.15)	2.20	(1.00)
Post	1.74	(.88)	2.41	(.98)
Difference	-.69		-.41	
Parent Confidence [†]				
Pre	2.60	(.65)	2.37	(.85)
Post	2.00	(.48)	2.34	(.80)
Difference	-.60		-.03	
Parent Comfort [†]				
Pre	2.25	(.89)	2.32	(.52)
Post	1.78	(.53)	2.38	(.50)
Difference	-.47		-.06	

[†] Lower scores reflect *higher* ratings.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of Satisfaction Ratings for Parents and Teenagers

	Foster teenagers (n = 22)		Foster parents (n = 23)	
	<u>M</u>	<u>(SD)</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>(SD)</u>
Video	2.09	(.97)	2.22	(.74)
Instruction	1.91	(.87)	1.87	(.63)
Class materials	1.82	(.91)	1.91	(.67)
Enjoyment	2.41	(1.01)	1.91	(.73)
Helpfulness	1.86	(.94)	2.22	(1.13)
Recommend to others	1.95	(1.09)	1.35	(.65)
More classes	2.09	(1.19)	2.00	(1.35)

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to investigate the feasibility of an instructional unit designed to teach foster teenagers apartment-hunting skills. The unit is the first in a proposed series on independent living skills. The approach used a dramatized video story to organize and guide a set of instructional activities with hands-on materials.

The intervention brought together independent living coordinators with foster teenagers and their foster parents. The primary aim of the intervention was to give foster teenagers relevant information and skills and to bolster their confidence in and comfort with finding a place to live.

The evaluation study showed robust effects on all measures used to assess the *Apartment Hunting* curriculum. Foster teenagers who received the instruction made significant overall gains in knowledge of core skills which included choosing roommates, using the classified ad section, understanding leases and rental applications, budgeting, tenant and landlord rights, and inspecting an apartment. Looking for an apartment involves many factors that are difficult for first-time renters to anticipate. Foster teenagers, in particular, are very vulnerable because they often begin with unrealistic expectations, very limited budgets, no experience, and a fragile sense of self-esteem. Unfortunately, most are turned off to instructional situations and many even require special education curricula. Thus, the gains in knowledge that teenagers demonstrated in this study were especially encouraging. Familiarity with the core skills of this curriculum may help foster teenagers create successful apartment-hunting experiences during their critical initial period of transition.

The foster teenagers in the intervention condition also felt more confident about looking for a place to live. Increases in confidence without corresponding increases in knowledge would probably indicate a growing false sense of security, which is typical among foster teenagers after they leave foster care. However, concomitant increases in confidence and knowledge signify that the teenagers had a repertoire of skills *and* they were prepared to use it. Although the present study did not test for cause-and-effect relationships between knowledge and confidence, gains in these two variables were related. Thus, teenagers may have felt more confident because of the knowledge they had gained, or an increased sense of confidence could have led to more learning. The curriculum positively affected both, allowing each to reinforce the other.

It is very important for foster teenagers to maintain a positive contact with their support system as they make the transition to independent living. Findings in the present study showed that foster teenagers felt more comfortable talking with their foster parents and counselors about finding a place to live. Not surprisingly, teenagers who felt more confident about their ability to find a place to live also felt more comfortable talking to others about it.

There were equivalent changes in attitude for the foster parents in the intervention condition. These parents felt more confident helping their foster teenager find a place to live, and more comfortable thinking and talking about it. Thus, the findings showed that the intervention provided parents with a means to become constructively involved in

teaching their foster teenagers independent living skills.

There were some trends in the findings concerning gender differences. Female teenagers had somewhat higher knowledge, but were less confident and comfortable than male teenagers. Although males and females both made significant overall improvements in all outcomes, it points to the importance of designing materials that address issues of self-esteem and competence among female teenagers.

The findings in the current study were limited in two important aspects. First, changes in outcome scores were short-term. Teenagers would have to be assessed over at least several months in order to judge whether the gains could be maintained long enough to have any practical effect. Second, although the measures used in the study were adapted from existing instruments, they are not standardized. However, the pre- and post-treatment data for the control group indicate good test-retest consistency. Also, gains in the intervention group demonstrate good face validity. The AHS represents the most complete quantitative measure of housing skills designed for foster teenagers. Future studies need to test the psychometric qualities of the questionnaire.

Foster parent involvement turned out to be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, parents enjoyed the instruction and benefitted from participating. However, independent living coordinators found it difficult to recruit foster parents. While foster parent participation is desirable, it should not restrict the use of the curriculum with foster teenagers. The full curriculum proposed for Phase II will take this into account. Foster parent participation will be an option written into the curriculum guide. The videotapes in Phase II will also strengthen the focus on modeling foster parent behavior.

In conclusion, the curriculum and materials developed in Phase I proved to be an effective model for teaching foster teenagers independent living skills. Independent living coordinators found it easy to use, and foster teenagers and parents learned from and enjoyed the activities. The model included four basic components: a dramatized video story, role-play, discussion, and experience with practical hands-on materials. The video and teaching strategy also created important opportunities for peer communication and interaction among foster teenagers.