



IDEAS

Youth Empowerment Information, Data Collection, and Exploration on Avoidance of Sex

April 2019

IDEAS from the Field: A Case Study of the Healthy Visions Program

As part of the federal government's ongoing efforts to explore new approaches to empower youth to make healthy, informed decisions about their relationships and behaviors, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) administers the Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) grant program. This funding stream supports programs that teach adolescents to avoid sexual activity while also providing education and support related to personal responsibility, self-regulation, goal setting, healthy relationships, focusing on the future, and avoiding drug and alcohol use. Through a focus on sexual risk avoidance and positive youth development, the programs aim to prevent unplanned pregnancies and other consequences of risk behaviors, and help adolescents develop to their full potential.

This brief spotlights Healthy Visions, an SRAE grantee in Cincinnati, Ohio. Healthy Visions uses multiple program components and curricula to serve a diverse population ranging from public school youth in urban, rural, and suburban settings to pre-adjudicated youth in detention centers. This brief provides an example of how one grantee has structured and implemented its program. The brief can inform practitioners and policymakers about strategies to encourage diverse youth across varying settings to avoid risks, particularly those associated with early sexual activity.

This brief is the product of a case study conducted as part of the Youth Empowerment Information, Data Collection, and Exploration on Avoidance of Sex (IDEAS) project, which is being conducted by Mathematica Policy Research and overseen by the HHS ACF, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in collaboration with the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health. The goal of the IDEAS project is to collect data from programs, youth, and parents to help identify age-appropriate strategies, skills, messages, and themes most likely to resonate with youth on topics related to sexual risk avoidance, teen pregnancy prevention, and youth well-being.

Healthy Visions

"Change your story." This simple mission statement reflects the goals of the Healthy Visions organization: encourage youth to reflect on their relationships,

Overview of Healthy Visions Program

Targeted outcomes: Risk avoidance attitudes and skills, self-respect, healthy relationships, sexual delay, academic performance

Primary staff: Executive director, program director/senior facilitator, five program facilitators, and operations director

Primary implementation settings: In class during school, at school after school, juvenile detention facility, community education center for at-risk youth

Key populations served: Students grades 6 to 12, youth in detention and with special needs (ages 10 to 21)

Curricula: Choosing the Best, TYRO Rites of Passage

Location: Cincinnati, Ohio, and surrounding area

choices, and behaviors and ultimately realize that they have control over their future. Healthy Visions provides risk avoidance programming to more than 10,000 youth annually through the Choosing the Best (CtB) and TYRO Rites of Passage (TYRO ROP) curricula. Healthy Visions operates primarily in public and private middle schools and high schools and in community settings, including a county-run juvenile detention center and an education center for disadvantaged and disabled youth.

Healthy Visions administers CtB and TYRO ROP either separately or in combination to cover topics related to positive youth development, including risk avoidance (such as delaying sexual initiation), goal setting, healthy relationships, communication skills, conflict resolution, stress management, and self-respect. Healthy Visions leadership believe that all youth have value and the potential for a positive future. This fundamental principle of respect gives Healthy Visions’ facilitators a platform to discuss sensitive topics.

This brief describes Healthy Visions’ programming, including its Real Talk approach and its use of CtB and TYRO ROP in schools and other settings. In particular, it highlights Healthy Visions’ work with pre-adjudicated youth in the Hamilton County Youth Detention Center as an example of program implementation in a specific setting.

Hiring and investing in program staff

Healthy Visions leadership believe that effective programming requires passionate facilitators with strong interpersonal skills and extensive training, as well as curricula that challenge and inspire youth. The Healthy Visions program works across a variety of settings and adapts its model to youth from different backgrounds. Facilitators explain that the themes they cover do not differ across sites; youth everywhere care about relationships and love, and are capable of self-discovery and self-regulation. The way youth apply these themes to their lives, however, may vary by setting, making the facilitator essential to the success of the program. As a result, Healthy Visions uses a purposeful approach to hire and train its staff.

New facilitator applicants are often referred by current staff who feel they have the qualities and skills the job requires. Healthy Visions facilitators are young, college-educated professionals who speak passionately about the organization’s mission. Although the facilitators have different backgrounds (from social workers to store managers), almost all have experience leading trainings, facilitating groups, and managing staff. Most facilitators come from Ohio and bring a deep understanding of the areas they serve. Some grew up in high-risk, low-income communities and have overcome many challenges. Healthy Visions looks for staff who are self-aware and confident—qualities essential to leading sensitive conversations with youth. Facilitators must be able to connect with and relate to participants while maintaining their authority and role as a trusted adult mentor. To ensure they have the right combination

of skills, staff go through a trial period of several weeks before they are officially hired by Healthy Visions. They also participate in extensive training and two months of job shadowing before teaching students on their own.

Staff training doesn’t end after the first few months. Healthy Visions provides ongoing technical assistance and support to facilitators to help develop and refine their skills. The program director and executive director conduct periodic unannounced observations of each facilitator, and all staff undergo yearly evaluations. Healthy Visions requires staff to obtain several certifications and attend supplemental training modules, and the executive director continuously looks for additional training opportunities. The team also recognizes the importance of facilitator self-care and mental health and encourages staff to lean on and support one another inside and outside the classroom. Healthy Visions holds weekly two-hour meetings for staff to learn from one another, share experiences, and recharge.

Healthy Visions Facilitator Training Requirements

- ✓ Certifications in Sexual Risk Avoidance Specialist (Ascend), Choosing the Best, and TYRO Rites of Passage.
- ✓ Supplemental training provided for classroom management, trauma competent caregiving, mental health, dating violence/consent, suicide prevention, and child protection.

Connecting with youth: the “Real Talk” approach

The aim of the staff training and support is to prepare Healthy Visions facilitators to help youth understand the benefits of goal setting, self-regulation, and personal responsibility. Staff report that successful administration of the curricula occurs when youth respect and trust the facilitator and start to understand the content through the lens of their own lives. Healthy Visions staff feel that creating a trusted-adult mentor relationship between facilitator and student is essential to the learning process. As one facilitator explained, a foundational goal of Healthy Visions is to make sure youth understand that: “You are lovable. You are valuable. You matter.” Healthy Visions staff believe that when youth understand this message, they will better absorb the curricula’s content and feel comfortable discussing the content using their own experiences.

“REAL TALK means that we have an honest, open conversation about what is really going on in [youth’s] lives. We talk about the fact that, yes they are locked up with a juvenile record, but that does not mean their life is over. We talk about the fact that they just made a mistake, which caused them to land in the detention center, and that they are not bad people. We talk about labels and how often we let labels define our lives. We talk about how life is structured when you grow up in poverty and how to break out of the poverty system.”

Healthy Visions staff

To develop trust, foster mutual respect, and “meet the youth where they’re at,” Healthy Visions facilitators use an approach they call “Real Talk.” Real Talk starts by forming individual connections with youth to determine how best to connect the curricula to their experiences. Healthy Visions facilitators believe that most youth experiences can be aligned with at least one of the curricula lessons; the facilitator’s role is to understand what the youth are currently struggling with and to integrate those topics into the lessons. To do this, facilitators attempt to promote open, honest communication. As one facilitator explained, all youth have relationships and conflict in their lives; they want to talk about these things, but they need the right environment. Facilitators use Real Talk to create an environment of mutual respect and to establish themselves as authority figures who will “tell it like it is” and who have the students’ best interests in mind. The goals of Real Talk are to understand where youth are coming from, validate their feelings and perspectives, and help them make healthy decisions.

“I think it was great to hear from [Healthy Visions], have them speak to us to try to show us a different way. Also, [Healthy Visions] let us know we matter and we are important, it actually means a lot to me. I believe “we matter” was the topic most people my age need to hear.”

Healthy Visions participant
Hamilton County Youth Detention Center

As part of this Real Talk approach, facilitators begin all lessons with a get-to-know-you exercise. These activities help facilitators get a sense of the students and the issues that are on their minds. The exercise becomes the launching point for the lesson. For example, at the beginning of a lesson at the Hamilton County Detention Center, a facilitator asked the group what they missed most from their lives before they were in detention. One participant responded that he missed his mother. The facilitator probed further, and soon the group began a discussion about relationships, love, and family. Healthy Visions facilitators believe that letting the youth drive the application of the lesson enables them to explore the curriculum naturally. Healthy Visions staff call this technique Real Talk because it enables them to cover the curriculum using real, personally relevant examples from youth’s lives.

Youth Engagement Techniques

Begin a session with the question: “What do you want to talk about today?”

Throw around a beach ball with an icebreaker question to start a conversation.

Pass out candy to engage youth in the discussion.

Ask youth to stand on different sides of the room in response to a question.

Include an open Q&A time during each session.

Staff must be thoroughly familiar with all of the curriculum lessons so they can use issues that come up in the classroom as a springboard into a lesson. One staff member noted, “The content that comes out organically [in the classroom] is what was [developed] in you intentionally.” Healthy Visions invests substantial time on curriculum training to ensure each curriculum is administered with fidelity while still responding to the unique needs of the setting and the youth it serves.

To promote curriculum fidelity, Healthy Visions relies on observational monitoring visits and support from an independent outside evaluator. The Healthy Visions program director conducts periodic unannounced visits to monitor the performance of the facilitators and their adherence to the curricula’s content and approach. Healthy Visions also works with the independent evaluator to help ensure students are receiving the intended content. The evaluator developed pre- and post-program surveys that Healthy Visions distributes

at the beginning and end of a program session, and then analyzes and reports on data from these surveys and provides feedback to Healthy Visions. The surveys collect data on attitudes, norms, behavioral intentions, and behavior changes. Healthy Visions staff review the results by facilitator to determine if youth appear to be learning key concepts.

“When you ask [youth] those [introspective] questions, you really open up a level of self-awareness and self-discovery that helps them find their value. They become more in tune with who they are, why they feel the way they feel, where they come from, where they want to go.... It all sets the stage for self-regulation.”

Healthy Visions staff

Delivering the message with complementary curricula: Choosing the Best and TYRO Rites of Passage

Healthy Visions administers two curricula—CtB and/or TYRO ROP—through in-school classroom-administered sessions, supplemental in-school group mentoring sessions, and interactive after-school programs. It also offers supplemental one-time activities, including assemblies and miniseries (small group mentoring sessions). Training staff on both CtB and TYRO ROP allows Healthy Visions to be responsive to school and program needs; modules from both curricula cover some of the most requested topics (for example, bullying and social media).

Healthy Visions has been administering CtB for more than 13 years, and uses it as the primary curriculum in school settings. CtB is a sexual risk avoidance education curriculum that covers risks of sexual behavior, choices and rewards, relationship education, alcohol and drug abuse, refusal skills, character development, and building self-esteem. Through its delivery of CtB, Healthy Visions programming meets Ohio’s state requirements for school sexual health education, which requires an emphasis on abstinence education. CtB includes five age-specific curricula covering grades 6 to 12, with associated youth workbooks, video content, and classroom exercises. Healthy Visions worked directly with CtB developers

to create condensed five-day versions of the program by combining similar lessons and exercises. The modified program mirrors the original seven- to eight-day curricula, providing content that differs slightly as appropriate by age. For example, the 6th-grade curriculum focuses more on relationships generally (emphasizing friendships and relationships with parents) rather than discussing the sexual aspects of romantic relationships. The curricula for older youth target sexual risk avoidance more directly.

TYRO ROP is a positive youth development curriculum that uses a strengths-based approach to focus on goal setting, character development, self-esteem, healthy relationships, identity, and risk avoidance across 45 lessons. Healthy Visions draws on a smaller number of TYRO ROP lessons depending on the needs and interests of the youth it is serving. The broad range of lessons allows Healthy Visions to apply TYRO ROP to many different topics at the request of schools or community programs.

Healthy Visions offers various services to schools and programs. The most common is its **In-School Five-Day Program**, a classroom program delivered by Healthy Visions facilitators during a middle or high school health or physical education class. This option covers the modified five-day CtB content during one school week. Healthy Visions also offers **Supplemental Group Mentoring Sessions** as an add-on to the in-school five-day program. These ongoing, in-school mentoring sessions draw on TYRO ROP content and are usually delivered once each week in a classroom format following implementation of the five-day CtB program. The mentoring sessions build on CtB, providing a more in-depth option for schools that want Healthy Visions facilitators to have a more active, consistent presence with students.

Healthy Visions also provides one-on-one mentoring for smaller subsets of youth in its **After-School Program** using the TYRO ROP curriculum. The after-school program is usually administered individually to youth after they complete the five-day, CtB in-school program, and it may be offered to students who volunteer or who are nominated by school staff.

Schools can also request services such as assemblies, miniseries, and other small group discussions. **Assemblies** are common, especially at the beginning of the school year, and they allow Healthy Visions to expand its reach. Topics and content vary by school; usually schools have specific topics they would like to address on a large scale, such as bullying or social media. TYRO ROP content is often used in conjunction

with CtB, depending on the specific request. Conducting an assembly is a useful way for Healthy Visions to start a new relationship with a school. For example, schools may invite Healthy Visions to lead an assembly and then ask facilitators to return to administer the in-school, five-day program. Other offerings, like the miniseries and small-group discussions, are similar to the in-school and after-school mentoring and reflect Healthy Visions' effort to respond flexibly to school needs.

"This program made me feel that I actually mean something in this world and that I have a chance."

Healthy Visions participant
Hamilton County Youth Detention Center

Healthy Visions also provides services in non-school settings. **The Community-Based Five-Day Program** involves small group sessions, typically with 7 to 10 participants, in non-school settings. Healthy Visions administers this program in the Hamilton County Detention Center and in a local children's education center that works with special needs youth. The community program can be adapted, depending on the needs of the facility. At the children's education center, Healthy Visions offers CtB content and customizes it as needed based on the age of the youth, which can range from 10 to 21 years old. At the Hamilton County Detention Center, Healthy Visions administers a five-day curriculum of TYRO ROP to youth from ages 10 to 21. TYRO ROP was originally developed for populations that had experienced incarceration, and Healthy Visions leadership feel that its broader youth development focus is a good fit for youth in the detention center. Moreover, TYRO ROP does not require use of associated student workbooks (as does CtB), and outside workbooks are not allowed in the detention center.

Reaching at-risk youth in a juvenile detention center

Since early 2017, Healthy Visions has conducted almost 30 small-group, five-day program sessions with more than 200 youth living at the Hamilton County Youth Detention Center. The 160-bed detention center houses pre-adjudicated youth up to age 21 awaiting sentencing. Youth admitted to the facility live in small "pods" of about 10 people based on age and gender. Throughout the year, residents attend

Healthy Visions: Key Program Options

In-School Five-Day Program

- CtB, modified content to fit within five days
- Approximately 10,000 students served annually

Supplemental Group Mentoring Sessions

- In-school five-day program, plus TYRO ROP content delivered through weekly classroom sessions
- Approximately 350 students served annually

After-School Program

- TYRO ROP content
- Approximately 20 youth served annually

School Assemblies

- TYRO ROP or CtB content, depending on school needs
- Approximately 5,000 youth served annually

Community-Based Five-Day Program

- CtB and/or TYRO ROP content
- **Juvenile detention center:** TYRO ROP delivered to approximately 200 youth annually
- **Children's education center:** CtB, modified five-day content delivered to approximately 50 youth annually

educational sessions provided by the Cincinnati Board of Education. Healthy Visions supplements this education with one or two facilitators who work with one pod at a time. Healthy Visions' relationship with the center began when a juvenile judge referred Hamilton County Detention Center administrators to the organization.

Healthy Visions' work at the Hamilton County Detention Center models the key elements of the approach it uses in school classroom settings, albeit primarily using a different curriculum. Healthy Visions administers TYRO ROP content to each detention center pod using the Real Talk approach. Because the pods are separated by age and gender, the Healthy Visions groups are single-sex and targeted to youth of similar age. Most of the residents are young men ages 10 to 18, so Healthy Visions typically holds separate sessions for three age groups: 10 to 14, 15 to 17, and 18. Healthy Visions provides one or two male facilitators for each group. As in school settings, facilitators discuss topics like personal responsibility, decision making, risk avoidance, respect, self-esteem, and healthy relationships. Facilitators allow youth to start the conversation, which they use as a starting point for the day's lessons.

"This program helped me a lot. I can control my emotions and reactions because of these skills."

Healthy Visions participant
Hamilton County Youth Detention Center

The Healthy Visions facilitators stress that their success in connecting with youth at the detention center comes from meeting the youth "where they're at" and having nonjudgmental conversations about goals and decisions. Facilitators explain that the youth at the detention center are looking for guidance and purpose, and although their situation is inherently different from that of students in school, the program approach is the same—the facilitators just adjust the perspective they use to discuss similar content. One facilitator explained that he acknowledges upfront that youth know firsthand what risks and consequences are because "they're locked up." Instead of shying away from that point, facilitators use the Real Talk approach to discuss it openly to form an initial connection and build lasting trust and rapport.

Comments from detention center participants on a recent post-program survey conducted by the Healthy Visions independent evaluator reveal several themes and takeaways: a desire for personal change and

improvement, a focus on setting goals, and hope for the future. Detention center staff and Healthy Visions facilitators feel that, after the program, youth express newfound motivation for personal change and self-improvement. In a post-program comment, one participant explained, "I honestly felt like my life was a little too late for me to change. But I'm just becoming a man, so my life has just started. My childhood is my past and that's where it will stay. It doesn't determine how I live." This sentiment was also reiterated by some detention center staff, who feel the program helps youth understand that they don't have to be defined by their past. Both youth and detention center staff complimented the facilitators and requested that the program be extended. A few students praised the Real Talk approach and repeated key program phrases like "Have a why" and "Be a victor, not a victim."

"HV [Healthy Visions] helped me to want to change my life around and do the right thing. It makes me want to commit to a task to accomplish my goals in what I want to do in life. I did not have a goal before I met these guys, now they have me thinking about everything."

Healthy Visions participant
Hamilton County Youth Detention Center

Key Program Features and Lessons Learned

Healthy Visions encourages youth to take control of their future by showing them that they matter and challenging them to make purposeful, thoughtful decisions. The Healthy Visions program model runs on a few fundamental elements:

- ✓ **Hiring high-quality and dynamic program messengers.** Healthy Visions' facilitators are young, well-trained motivational speakers and role models. They express investment in the organization's mission and dedication to connecting on a personal level with the youth they meet.
- ✓ **Investing in staff.** Healthy Visions spends time ensuring its facilitators know the curricula inside and out through intensive training, shadowing, team meetings, and constant feedback. Facilitators must understand how the modules and chapters from CtB and TYRO ROP (1) relate to each other and (2) apply to real life. The facilitators need this understanding to pass the messages along in the classroom. Healthy Visions leadership also realizes the toll this work can take on facilitators and invests in facilitator support and self-care. The emphasis on training, mental health, and support is important to prevent facilitator burnout and encourage collaboration among facilitators.
- ✓ **Meeting youth "where they're at."** Healthy Visions uses a Real Talk approach to foster a relationship with students based on trust, honesty, and respect. Real Talk means giving youth a voice, understanding their perspective, inspiring them to understand their worth, and ultimately encouraging them to make healthy decisions. This relationship becomes the basis for students to connect themes from the curricula to their lives. It also helps facilitators step into the role of trusted adult, which is essential for program success.
- ✓ **Using curricula that can be adapted and administered in different settings, while still maintaining fidelity to curriculum content.** Healthy Visions selected two curricula, CtB and TYRO ROP, which cover topics like healthy relationships, goal setting, and risk avoidance. Using a sexual risk avoidance education curriculum (CtB) and a youth development curriculum (TYRO ROP) gives Healthy Visions the flexibility to offer a variety of program options—from school assemblies to ongoing mentoring—that can address the unique needs and interests of different schools, organizations, and youth. Healthy Visions promotes curriculum fidelity through a commitment to staff monitoring and training, as well as its partnership with Midwest Evaluation and Research.
- ✓ **Applying the same key strategies across settings.** The biggest differences across settings are the experiences youth and facilitators draw on to engage with the content. Healthy Visions leadership believe youth everywhere want their voices heard and want to know that they are valued. Staff at Healthy Visions believe the facilitator's job is to become a mentor and partner to youth, and to help guide them in the right direction. As one Healthy Visions facilitator put it, "I see where you're at. Let me know where you can go."

Methods for Conducting the Case Study

Mathematica conducted the case study through a site visit, classroom observations, and a review of program documents. Mathematica staff spent multiple days on site, conducting semi-structured interviews with staff from Healthy Visions, three participating high schools, and the Hamilton County Youth Detention Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. Mathematica staff also conducted observations in two schools. The team interviewed eight program staff and nine school- or community-based staff using separate interview guides designed to capture various elements of program design and implementation. The team examined and synthesized the information collected across respondents in the development of this brief.

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