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Off to a Good Start: A Practical Tool for Sexual Health Education

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Off to a Good Start: A Practical Tool for Sexual Health Education

Abstract

The Off to a Good Start: Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Development of Youth Grades 5–8 (OTAGS) curriculum provides students with a foundation for future sex education. The curriculum consists of three modules covering puberty, healthful relationships, and HIV and sexually transmitted infections. University of Illinois Extension educators taught OTAGS at 15 schools in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs. Evaluation results were favorable, indicating knowledge improvement. OTAGS complements other Extension programs, lays a foundation for future sex education, and provides others in Extension with the opportunity to play a role in making timely and accurate sex education accessible to youths.

Keywords: [sex education](#), [puberty](#), [HIV/STIs](#), [healthful relationships](#), [healthful lifestyles](#)

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Introduction

Although widely supported, sex education programming in schools varies across the United States. Only 38% of high schools and 14% of middle schools provide programming addressing all 19 critical sex education topics identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Brener et al., 2017). There is a need for early sexuality education as the incidence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) continues to rise (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 2018).

We were part of a group of community health educators at University of Illinois Extension in Cook County who developed Off to a Good Start: Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Development of Youth Grades 5–8 (OTAGS) and were fundamental in implementing and evaluating the program. The OTAGS curriculum provides middle school students with a foundation for future sex education. Middle school youths need a basic understanding of anatomy and reproduction to appropriately benefit from subsequent sexuality education and access to contraceptives. Providing youths with honest and timely sex education allows them to have a base for healthful lifestyle choices and exemplifies Extension's efforts to advance educational attainment and promote social justice.

Curriculum Description

The OTAGS curriculum consists of three modules that cover puberty, healthful relationships, and HIV/STIs. OTAGS aligns with the National Sexuality Education Learning Standards (Future of Sex Education Initiative,

2012). In general, fifth and sixth graders receive the puberty module, sixth and seventh graders receive the healthful relationships module, and seventh and eighth graders receive the HIV/STIs module. The puberty module consists of four 45-min lessons on body changes, the male and female reproductive systems, and menstruation. The healthful relationships component consists of two 45-min lessons that cover healthful and unhealthy relationship traits and assertive communication skills. The HIV/STI module consists of three 45-min lessons on modes of transmission and risk reduction.

Implementation

During 3 school years, from October 2015 to February 2018, 13 public schools and two private schools in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs received the OTAGS curriculum. School teachers, counselors, and administrators requested OTAGS according to their students' needs. Extension educators taught the curriculum during school hours. Ten schools obtained the puberty module, three schools obtained the healthful relationships module, and five schools received the HIV/STIs module (some schools requested multiple modules). Refer to Table 1 for additional information on the implementation of OTAGS.

Table 1.
OTAGS Curriculum Implementation

School year	Module topic	Grade(s)	No. of schools	No. of students
2015–2016	Puberty	4,5,6	9	414
	Healthful relationships	6,7	2	152
	HIV/STIs	6,7,8	4	196
2016–2017	Puberty	5	1	62
2017–2018	Healthful relationships	6	1	49
	HIV/STIs	7,8	1	41
Total				914

Note. OTAGS = Off to a Good Start: Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Development of Youth Grades 5–8. Table does not include data for one school due to poor questionnaire completion rates.

Evaluation

Extension educators collected parent consent and student assent prior to program initiation. Students completed a pretest before the first lesson and a posttest after the last lesson. The puberty module questionnaire included 20 items (11 matching and nine multiple choice), the healthful relationships module questionnaire included eight true/false items, and the HIV/STIs module questionnaire included 16 items (10 true/false and six multiple choice). For all modules, the posttest included the open-ended question "After being in this program, I learned. . . ."

The evaluation results for the three modules were favorable, indicating that students' knowledge improved (Table 2). These findings do not include data for students who participated in OTAGS but opted out of the evaluation. Additionally, the data presented do not include data collected via an earlier version of the

evaluation questionnaire. Refer to Table 2 for additional information about the OTAGS evaluation.

Table 2.
OTAGS Curriculum Evaluation

School year	Module topic	No. of evaluations	Average pretest score	Average posttest score	Preprogram–postprogram difference
2015–2016	Puberty	328	39%	77%	38%
	Healthful relationships	115	66%	85%	19%
	HIV/STIs	114	54%	80%	26%
2016–2017	Puberty	44	35%	75%	40%
2017–2018	Healthful relationships	35	78%	86%	8%
	HIV/STIs	34	54%	84%	30%

Note. OTAGS = Off to a Good Start: Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Development of Youth Grades 5–8.

OTAGS was designed to offer students a continuous learning experience in preparation for sexuality education in high school and beyond. However, none of the schools that participated in the initial implementation of the curriculum received the curriculum in its entirety. A more common scenario was teaching of one module to the same grade level over a series of years. This presented both programming and evaluation challenges. The program did not reach the same students over multiple years as was the original vision, and a long-term evaluation was not feasible given limited resources and challenges with the informed consent process.

Conclusion

The OTAGS curriculum can improve student knowledge about puberty, healthful relationships, and HIV/STIs. As Hockersmith (2013) expressed, not every Extension agent is comfortable with or should be teaching sexuality education; however, OTAGS is a practical tool for those agents who are ready and able to help ease youths' transition into adulthood. OTAGS complements family life and 4-H youth development programs and aids outreach in both rural and urban settings. Extension professionals working with family life and 4-H programs that are cemented in communities may be able to implement the curriculum in its entirety, making a long-term evaluation more feasible.

Extension professionals can use augmented reality to teach portions of the OTAGS curriculum. Examples of this approach already exist within Extension, as in the case of the *Let's Talk About It* publication—a guide to help parents navigate conversations about sex and puberty with their children (Wallace, 2018). Wallace (2018) used images in the publication to connect the user to topic-related videos, websites, and resources. Using augmented reality to link OTAGS participants to websites with expanded content on developmental changes during puberty or visuals of anatomical structures could make learning about the reproductive system a more interesting and engaging experience.

Opportunities for integrating the OTAGS curriculum into existing Extension programs are plentiful. At a time of stagnated prevention efforts and resurgence of HIV and STI rates due to diminishing resources for sex education programs (Howard, 2018), Extension can play an important role in making timely and accurate sex education accessible to youths. To learn more about OTAGS, email Author Lopez at slopez2@illinois.edu.

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