

6-16-2021

Farm Dinner Theater: Improving Health And Safety For Farm Families

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Recommended Citation

Reed, D. B., McCallum, D., & Legault, E. (2021). Farm Dinner Theater: Improving Health And Safety For Farm Families. *Journal of Extension*, 59(2), Article 16. <https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.59.02.16>

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Cover Page Footnote

The authors wish to thank all the Extension personnel, the staff of the Capstone Poll, and the farm families who made this project a success. This study was conducted under CDC/NIOSH R01OH010666 and currently is funded for upscaling by the Rita and Alex Hillman Foundation. The findings presented here are the sole responsibility of the authors and have not been reviewed or endorsed by the funding agencies.

Farm Dinner Theater: Improving Health and Safety for Farm Families

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Abstract. This article provides a brief overview of Farm Dinner Theater (FDT), a novel intervention that positively influences the health and safety behaviors of senior family farmers and their family. The FDT uses principles of adult learning and engages the audience in conversations about their health and safety experiences. The FDT was developed through interdisciplinary community-engaged research and tested using a repeated measures design with 553 intervention and 317 comparison participants. Significant changes were reported and the FDT is now being used by Extension through the use of a toolkit developed by the project.

INTRODUCTION

Farm culture is difficult to change, especially when it comes to health and work behaviors (Neufeld, 2005); however, novel learning formats have proven acceptable and effective in addressing community issues (Ingram, 2013; McDonald, Williams, Carter, 2001). The Farm Dinner Theater (FDT) is an interactive intervention intended to change health and safety behaviors of senior farmers, a group that has long suffered the highest farming fatality rates (Myers, 2009). FDT incorporates two aspects of the readers' theater form of community theater: (1) a readers' script and (2) a didactic portion following the script. The scripts for FDT, which are based on the experiences of local farmers and literature on health and safety of senior farmers, and the interchange during the didactic portion reflect the social norms of the community regarding health and safety. The FDT provides a "safe place" to begin conversations about sensitive topics, such as farmer stress or changing the way work is performed.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The FDT incorporates aspects of readers' theater, which became popular during World War II when resources to produce plays were scarce (Coger & White, 1973). The focus of readers' theater lies in the words of the script rather than on elaborate sets, costumes, or actions. One important use of the FDT is to help audiences recognize the importance of certain behaviors and beliefs. This form of theater includes discussion of the theater's themes among the audience following the presentation. Open discussion allows the audience to reflect on the content, incorporate the information within their own lived experiences and within the social norms of the group (Ajzen, 1991). Through these discussions, new information becomes available, and the participant is empowered to make change. The theater becomes the medium for information sharing and processing. The FDT incorporates all these aspects to move individual and community health behaviors.

OVERVIEW OF FDT

Working with collaborators, we developed FDT programming and offered it in eight geographically diverse sites across three states between 2015–2018. The FDT was based on research that collected information about how senior farmers and their families view health and safety (Reed & Claunch, 2015; Reed & Claunch, 2017), a larger study of Kentucky and South Carolina farm couples ages 50 and over (Reed, Rayens, Conley, Westneat & Adkins, 2012), and the experiences of Extension staff who have "boots on the ground" experience with farmers and their

Table 1. Percent of Participants Who Reported Changes Made

Participants by farm work exposure time/week	Theater n = 553	Educational Packet n = 317	Test of differences
All participants			
Two weeks	52.7%	41.8%	$\chi^2(1) = 9.636^*$
Two months	60.3%	52.4%	$\chi^2(1) = 5.219^*$
Participants who do farm work ≥ 10 hours/week			
Two weeks	58.1%	44.4%	$\chi^2(1) = 11.476^*$
Two months	65.8%	56.5%	$\chi^2(1) = 5.369^*$

*Theater and Packet group are significantly different from each other at $p < .05$.

families. Development of the FDT involved partnerships between The University of Kentucky, The University of Alabama, Cooperative Extension programs in KY, TN, and VA, and local agricultural communities.

Theater events were planned through collaboration among Extension, local leaders, and nurses with agricultural health expertise. Local farmers served as actors. In all but one of the sites in which FDT programming occurred, the events were locally orchestrated by Extension personnel. Each event was offered in a place familiar to the community and accompanied by a meal served prior to the theater, essentially making this a “date night,” as farm couples who attended often touted it. This relaxed atmosphere set the stage for an evening of entertainment and learning.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Recruiting couples when possible, we enrolled 573 participants aged 45 and over in the eight county-based theater events we conducted. Additionally, we enrolled 360 participants in the same age group in a comparison group that received a mailed packet of information about the same health and safety topics that were addressed in the theater. Each group participated in two follow-up phone surveys—one at two weeks following the intervention (theater or mailed packet) and the other at two months following the intervention. Scripts focused on health and injury topics frequently noted in production agriculture: falls, musculoskeletal problems, hearing loss, cancer, stress, and intergenerational farming challenges. Additional topics were added depending on local interest.

In the theater group, 96.5% completed all phases of data collection, and in the educational packet group, 88.1% completed all data collection. A robust sample of both genders was secured, reflected by the 54% male and 46% female participants. There were no significant differences between groups by gender or age (mean age 63.2 years; SD 9.35). Immediate reaction to the dinner theater format was encouraging with 78% responding that the event captured the reality of aging farmers “extremely well”; 96% reported the event made them “stop and think” or “take action.” The theater group was significantly more likely than the packet group to report making health or safety-related changes at both the two-week and two-month data collection points (see Table 1).

The impact of the theater experience did not end with the household, as 24.5% and 38.2% of the participants reported that people who they had talked with about the theater content had also made changes two weeks and two months later, respectively. This diffusion of ideas supports the oral tradition of farm culture in information communication (Reed & Claunch, 2015). A pilot test of the theater with farm couples younger than age 45 (n = 66) had similar positive results.

CONCLUSION

The use of the arts to foster health is increasingly popular and effective, especially when utilizing cross-sector collaboration (Allen et al., 2014; Sonke et al, 2019). The theater intervention has proven to be an effective means of changing work behavior of farmers and their families. The format is acceptable to the farm community, effective, easily adapted to local issues, and can be delivered using existing infrastructure. It is being used by multiple Extension programs with promising results. To further strengthen the capacity of farm communities and organizations to sustain the intervention, a community didactic readers’ theater toolkit was developed. The toolkit is a step-by-step guide with detailed instructions for each phase of producing a farm dinner theater. An

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instructional video is also provided for visual guidance for Extension professionals who wish to produce their own theater. The theater toolkit is available at https://uky.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_emuHBiEcoIz2Rv or by contacting our first author.

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