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Lessons Learned from Engaging Latino Families in Community-Based Programs

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Abstract. A family-skills program for Latino fathers and youth was implemented to prevent youth obesity. Lessons learned focused on practices to address barriers to engagement and retention among fathers and youth within the Latino community. Program development issues included selection of organizations, facilitators, language, and delivery methods. Implementation issues included timing and location. Cultural issues regarding learner needs, and teaching and implementation methods need to be considered. Using the lessons learned, Extension professionals can create impactful programs that engage and retain Latino fathers and youth.

INTRODUCTION

Participant engagement in prevention programs conducted within community settings can be unpredictable among low-income Latino families who face barriers such as language, irregular work schedules, and transportation issues (Garcia-Huidobro et al., 2016; Nagao-Sato et al., 2023). However, engaging parents and youth in behavioral prevention programs is an important way to foster healthy adolescent development in the Latino community (Johnson et al., 2021). Latino families are the largest ethnic minority in the United States, constituting 18.7% of the nation's population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Therefore, addressing barriers to engagement in community-based programs is important among low-income Latino families.

Padres Preparados, Jóvenes Saludables is a family-skills obesity prevention program for Latino immigrant fathers or other male caregivers and youth 10–14 years of age. Mothers or other female caregivers are encouraged and welcome to attend. The program was developed and implemented following principles of community-based participatory research (Israel, 2013) to make use of focus groups and input from a father advisory board and leaders of Latino-serving organizations in the formative stage. The program consists of eight 2-hour weekly sessions intended to strengthen positive parenting practices to help youth eat healthy foods and be active. Each session follows an active learning and interactive approach for parents and youth to prepare food together and share a meal; learn about nutrition and physical activity; and be active together with yoga, dance, and relay activities. Activities regarding parenting practices are attended by parents or youth separately. Sessions are delivered in Spanish for parents and in English for youth. Parent sessions are led by a male/female pair of trained bilingual, bicultural facilitators. The program is held in partnership with community organizations such as community centers, churches, Extension offices, and charter schools.

Through implementation of the program as an initial randomized and controlled trial, we learned a great deal about engaging parents in community-based Extension nutrition education programs. We defined community-based programs, in this context, as (a) initiatives to address community health concerns relevant to participants' lives, (b) utilizing evidence-informed content and didactics, and (c) delivered in a non-formal educational environment (Bracho et al., 2016; Israel, 2013). We are sharing our top ten lessons learned so that other Extension professionals can better develop and implement future community-based programs for Latino parents and youth.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. NEVER TAKE WORDS, CONCEPTS, OR OBJECTIVES AT FACE VALUE

Although bilingual, bicultural research staff explained study protocols, some participants did not understand the explanation of randomization procedures. Families assigned to the delayed-treatment control group were initially confused about not being able to attend sessions immediately or did not want to wait for several months. Some did not return to attend sessions after the waiting period, because they had scheduled conflicting school classes, trips to their city of origin, and other personal, cultural, and religious activities.

2. CHOOSE FACILITATORS WHO CAN ENGAGE FAMILIES BASED ON THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES

Having sessions facilitated by bilingual, bicultural staff was a key factor in promoting parent engagement. The bilingual and bicultural team could understand the cultural nuances of Latino families and vice versa. Sessions facilitated by both an adult male and female who were parents themselves enriched the discussion and resulted in greater connectedness between participants and among facilitators and participants.

3. USE A PREFERRED LANGUAGE

Delivering the program in Spanish for parents and in English for youth addressed the preference of many youths to communicate in English and avoided language barriers for parents.

4. INCLUDE PARENT TIME, YOUTH TIME, AND FAMILY TIME

Two segments of each session were delivered separately for parents and youth. This separation allowed for richer discussion, as comments could be made freely without concern about reactions from other family members. Parents and youth were better able to express their thoughts and feelings with others of the same age with similar experiences. However, dividing participants into parent and youth groups and bringing them back together two times in each session was a challenge. At times, one group would finish before the other. Additionally, extra staff were necessary to guide participants from room to room.

5. APPLY PERSONALISMO IN ALL PROGRAM COMPONENTS

Applying the concept of personalismo was a positive factor in engaging Latino families. Personalismo is based on an appreciation of personal contact (Bermudez & Mancini, 2013) including shaking hands, greeting participants with a smile, and offering refreshments, which can make participants feel more welcome. Maintaining connections through friendly reminders like text messages and phone calls promoted engagement and retention with program participants and positive relationships with collaborating organizations.

6. IMPROVE RETENTION BY UTILIZING ORGANIZATIONS WITH STRONG COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Holding the Padres Preparados, Jóvenes Saludables program at some community organizations resulted in greater retention of families than at other settings. Families were familiar with these organizations and their staff and aware of other programs offered. These organizations may be a “one stop shop” that offer many services and support, and families seek other ways to be connected to various programs offered there.

7. UNDERSTAND THAT FAMILIES HAVE UNCONVENTIONAL SCHEDULES

Latino parents place a high priority on work to support their families, which sometimes means working a second or third shift or working more than 8-hour daily shifts (Crosby & Mendez, 2017). The need to prioritize work schedules can greatly affect attendance and completion. Eight weekly sessions may be too time consuming for some families given work and school commitments, so offering a variety of delivery methods (mobile apps, videos, zoom meetings) may enhance retention.

8. UNDERSTAND THAT REASONS FOR NO-SHOWS ARE NOT ALWAYS NEGATIVE

Based on cultural roots and traditions, Latino families may prioritize attendance at other events—like child sports activities such as soccer, karate, and taekwondo or religious activities such as catechism classes, church services, and committees—over attendance at community education programs. Therefore, scheduling programs at times that do not conflict with other priorities by polling participants to determine the best days of the week and times of the day to hold programs may reduce scheduling conflicts that would otherwise serve as barriers to attendance.

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9. LIMITED TRANSPORTATION CAN BE A BARRIER

Families may not own a vehicle or may only have one vehicle (often used by one family member to get to their workplace). Participants indicated that transportation or distance were barriers to attendance. Thus, holding programs close to where families live may enhance attendance because of possible ride sharing opportunities, more manageable use of public transportation, and time savings from a shorter commute.

10. EMBRACE TECHNOLOGY

The Padres Preparados, Jóvenes Saludables program sessions were held in person until the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted a change to remote delivery methods via a parent mobile app, zoom meetings, and text messages. We created an introductory session involving practice setting up, testing, and using the app, which prepared participants to confidently use the platform. We had families navigate through the app on their own mobile device, which allowed them to review, stop, and continue with the sessions at any time. In addition, participants could select their preferred language (English or Spanish) for the app. We revised the in-person materials so they could be used during zoom meetings and used WhatsApp text messages to communicate between meetings.

CONCLUSION

The insight we gained from developing and implementing the Padres Preparados, Jóvenes Saludables program for Latino parents and youth primarily pertained to addressing needs regarding language, culture, and traditional values. Other important practical considerations included the need to eliminate scheduling conflicts, address transportation barriers, and embrace technology to pivot to remote program delivery when necessary. Lastly, developing and implementing community-based programs in community settings with trusted organizational partners is highly recommended to enrich cultural sensitivity and increase attendance.

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