

Teen Role Models Can Help Shape New Eating Behaviors



Delivering nutrition messages and promoting behavior change in a cultural community can be challenging. However, small community size and a strong social support network can enhance change.

Appropriate role models offer another vehicle for encouraging change. Observational learning (part of the Social Learning Theory) explains the value of role models in helping individuals form their beliefs. Teen role models may be more effective than parents or teachers in encouraging behavior change among their peers and younger school-age children.² The school age child is in a period of development in which he or she becomes less dependent on family and more dependent on peer relationships.² “Summercise” offers an example of a successful health education program that utilized teen role models to shape the nutrition behavior of younger children.

SUMMERCISE

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of “Summercise” was to increase physical activity and nutrition awareness among a group of students in Nome, Alaska.

TARGET AUDIENCE

The target audience was 50 children, ages eight to 15, participating in a one-month summer program.

RATIONALE FOR THE INTERVENTION

Diabetes once was rare among Alaska Natives, but a chart audit by the Anchorage Native Medical Center revealed a marked increase in diabetes between 1985 and 1996. In particular, the Eskimos, who have the lowest rates of diabetes of any Alaska Native group, had the highest percentage increase.

This epidemic of diabetes is expected to continue, as evidenced

by the prevalence of diabetes among Native American populations that have adopted a Western lifestyle^{3,2}. A majority of Eskimos in Alaska own snowmobiles or four-wheel-drive vehicles, allowing them to be less physically active. Local grocery stores stock few fresh foods and many convenience items because of high transportation costs.^{3,2} State requirements for daily physical education in schools have been decreasing.⁴ These trends reflect the increasingly poor state of health of Alaska Native children.

METHODOLOGY

Sponsored by Norton Sound Health Corporation in Nome, “Summercise” was developed by two registered dietitians, with input from other health professionals. Three dietetic interns assisted with the program.

The program offered physical activity, cooking skills, and awareness of healthy foods. Fitness activities were noncompetitive and included walking, bicycle riding, and hiking. Bad weather is often a barrier to physical activity. To overcome this, students were taught how to dress for outdoor activities in inclement weather. Arctic gardening skills were also taught.

Teaching methods were based on the concepts of the Social Learning Theory. Teen team leaders were empowered to lead groups of younger students and to decide how tasks were to be accomplished. For example, they mapped their own routes for hikes and designed their own obstacle courses. Self-efficacy was demonstrated when teen leaders changed their behaviors to influence the behavior of the younger children.

Many activities combined education with fun. A puppet show set to rap music extolled the virtues of healthy eating. Photographs were taken of children with milk mustaches. Trivia challenges included nutrition questions. Teen-led teams competed against each other.



RESULTS

Weight reduction and increased physical endurance were used as quantitative measures of change in physical fitness. Parents were surveyed after the program regarding their child's physical fitness and changes in eating habits. Nutrition pre- and post-tests were administered to measure changes in nutrition awareness.

Evaluations were completed on 35 of the 50 participants. At the start of the program, 33 percent of the boys and 30 percent of the girls were assessed to be overweight. One-quarter of the boys were weighed after the program ended, and all lost weight. Approximately one-quarter of the girls lost weight; the remaining three-quarters maintained their weight. Parents had reported that their children were more active physically and were making healthy snack choices. Nutrition awareness improved, 60 percent of students received a score of at least 90 percent on a vegetable identification test.

LESSONS LEARNED

“Throughout the program, we encouraged children to stick with it — giving up or not participating was not acceptable. We rarely awarded prizes for a first-place finish. Instead, we rewarded the students for good effort, self-improvement, or attendance.”

— *Angela Polk, R.D., L.D., C.D.E.*
Norton Sound Health Corporation
Nome, AK



QUESTIONS

1. **Which of the following factors can help support behavior change?**
 - a. Lively teachers and principals
 - b. Small community size and a strong social support network
 - c. Funding
 - d. Rewards

2. **Who may be most effective in promoting behavior change in adolescents?**
 - a. Parent role models
 - b. Teen role models
 - c. Teacher role models
 - d. Government role models

3. **Which disease has become more prevalent among Alaska Natives?**
 - a. Heart disease
 - b. Osteoporosis
 - c. Diabetes
 - d. Alzheimer's

4. **What are the six concepts of the Social Learning Theory?**
 - a. reciprocal determinism, behavioral capability, expectations, self-efficacy, observational learning, and reinforcement
 - b. reciprocal education, behavioral content, expectations, self-efficacy, observational learning, and reinforcement
 - c. reciprocal determinism, behavioral capability, anticipation, self-reliance, observational learning, and reinforcement
 - d. reciprocal education, behavioral content, anticipation, self-reliance, observational learning, and reward

5. **In the “Summercise” campaign, how was success measured?**
 - a. Satisfaction with the summer program
 - b. Number of new friends made
 - c. Money saved
 - d. Weight reduction and increased physical endurance

ANSWERS:
 1. b 2. b 3. c 4. a 5. d

REFERENCES

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- ³ Mayer A, Brown T, Kelly J. Of Muktuk and Men. *Diabetes Spectrum*. 1998;11:141-3.
- ⁴ Promoting Physical Activity and Exercise Among Children. *ERIC Digest*. www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed416204.html
- ⁵ *Theory at a Glance: A Guide for Health Promotion Practice*. National Institutes of Health, National Cancer Institute.