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The School Yard Kids: A Puppet Show to Promote a Healthy Lifestyle

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Background

Recent national estimates found that 37.2% of school aged children (6-11 years old) have a Body Mass Index (BMI) greater than the 85th percentile for age and sex, and 18.8% of children have a BMI greater than the 95th BMI percentile.¹ In New York City, these percentages are even higher, with 43% greater than the 85th percentile and 19% greater than the 95th percentile for BMI.² Mexican American and Non-Hispanic black children are more likely to fall into these categories than Non-Hispanic white children.¹ Interventions to promote healthy weight behaviors among children are greatly needed.

Preventive health interventions such as observational learning and modeling can bring about a change in children's thought processes and behaviors.³ Puppets are an imaginative and fun way of providing health information according to social cognitive and norming principles. Puppets have been used to educate children on a variety of topics such as HIV, first aid, hygiene, and fruit and vegetable intake.⁴ The goal of this puppet show was to generate enthusiasm and promote dialogue about diet and physical activity.

Development

This project was initiated after receiving a request from a public school in the Bronx for a nutrition education program that would be appropriate for their younger students. The educational objectives (to teach children about diet and physical activity) and the general format were presented to school personnel, including a school social worker and two elementary school teachers, to determine age appropriateness for children in grades 1-3. Since over 90% the students at this public school were of color, (61% Hispanic students and 25% black students),⁵ we tried to purchase puppets of color to promote identification.

A team of nine student volunteers at the graduate (4), undergraduate (2), and high school level (3) developed the puppet show under the supervision of a health psychology PhD student and a faculty advisor. The script was adapted from the Albert Einstein Community Outreach

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Intended for Great Educational Materials (GEMS)

We would like to dedicate this article to the memory of Jenny Sivinsky, Project Coordinator of the Albert Einstein Community Outreach Program (2002-2004). Her contribution to reaching out to the schools and providing health education in this work was invaluable.

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Program-Bronx School Education, “Striking Out Cancer,” a puppet presentation about smoking.

Methods

A 30 minute puppet show was delivered to a group of 55 children, grades 1-3, attending summer school at a public school in the Bronx. A puppet theater was set up on the stage in the school’s auditorium. A health educator, one of the student volunteers, began the presentation with a short introduction on the importance of eating properly and exercising. Then the “School Yard Kids,” a set of five multi-ethnic puppets (two were black, two were white, one was Hispanic) purchased from an educational store, were introduced. The puppet show contained seven scenes that focused on diet and physical activity: making food choices in the cafeteria, stopping eating when you are full, having energy for recess after a well-balanced meal, girls playing competitive and noncompetitive sports, exercising just for fun even if you are not good at the sport, feeling healthy after exercising at recess, and setting healthy goals.

The puppet dialogues were prerecorded and played at the appropriate times during the presentation. In between each scene, the health educator interacted with the audience and asked children questions about the puppets’ behaviors. Questions included: *Is chocolate milk a healthy food? How do you know when you are full? Why is exercise important?* The elicited dialogue focused on healthy food choices and exercise. For example, children answered that exercise was important because “it makes your body stronger” and “you could be more faster.”

After the puppet show, students filled out evaluation forms. The first item on these forms asked the students to identify a healthy goal for themselves. They were then asked a set of three questions: *How sure are you that you are going to get to your healthy goal? (very sure/kind of sure/not sure at all), After seeing the Puppet Show, do you think that eating healthier foods is important?(yes/maybe/no), and After seeing the Puppet Show, do you think that exercising is important? (yes/maybe/no).* On the back of the evaluation form, children were asked to draw a picture related to their health goal.

Results

Fifty-five students participated in the puppet show educational intervention. A variety of student-generated health goals were identified that centered on the themes of healthy eating (45.5%), exercise (49.0%), and both healthy eating and exercise (0.04%). One response (“to finish school”) did not fit into these categories. Healthy goals included “drink more water and drink less soda” and “play basketball longer so I can get health.”

In addition to identifying a personal health goal, students were asked about confidence in reaching their goal, if they thought eating healthy food is important and if exercising is important. Students were confident about reaching their healthy goal: 83.6% were very sure, 12.7% were kind of sure, and only 3.6% were not sure at all that they would be able to get to their healthy goal. After viewing the puppet show, students agreed that healthy food and exercising were important (89.1% and 87.3% respectively). The rest of the students were unsure; no one thought that healthy food and exercising were *unimportant*. The objectives of our program, to generate enthusiasm and promote dialogue about diet and physical activity, were met.

Application

These results suggest that a puppet show can be used to generate dialogue about nutrition and physical activity among young children. Shortly after we ran the program, an event was planned by the school social worker. Juice was going to be served at the event, and the children asked

why she would not be serving water, a beverage promoted in the puppet show. This vignette demonstrates the effect of our intervention, beyond our initial elicited feedback.

Our puppet show health education intervention was well-received, relatively inexpensive, and easy to implement. Puppets may be purchased for a one-time cost of approximately \$40 each, with the play food and puppet-stage costing an addition \$105. It can be incorporated into after-school programs, summer camps, church programs, or as part of a health education curriculum. Creating take-home handouts for parents on the topics covered in this puppet show may be a useful addition for future presentations. The puppet show script is available online at: [blinded for review](#).

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Figure.