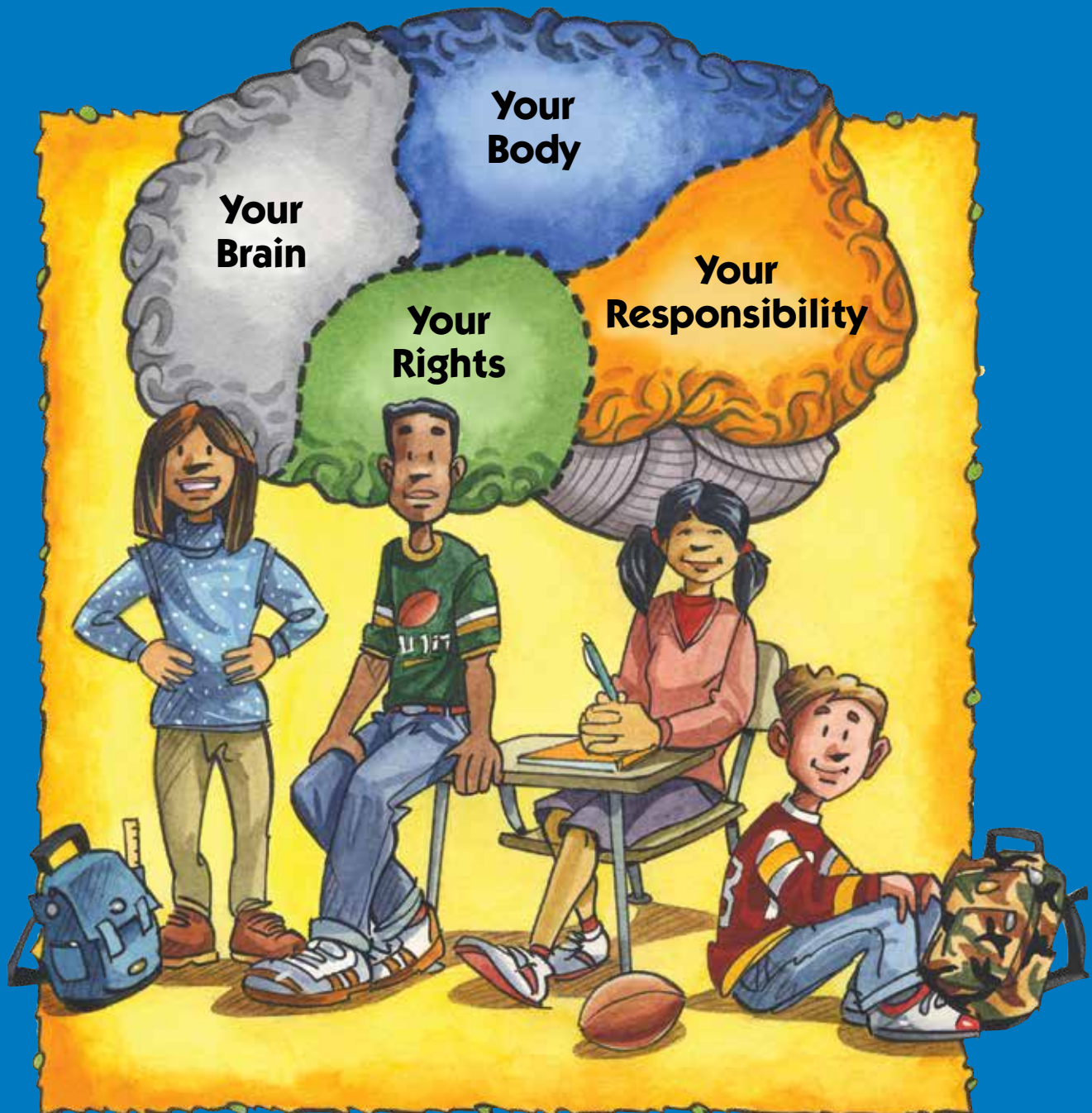


Above the Waist!

**Sexuality Education Beginning
With The Brain**



SEVENTH GRADE | LEVEL TWO

ABOVE THE WAIST!
Sexuality Education Beginning with the Brain



THE CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY
Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program

FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR
Dr. Michael A. Carrera

www.stopteenpregnancy.com

www.abovethewaist.org

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Something" activity adapted with
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Above the Waist!

Sexuality Education Beginning
With The Brain

AN INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

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Above the Waist is the product of hundreds of hours of work by CAS-Carrera staff and many others who generously shared their creativity, experience, and expertise. The richness of this curriculum is a testament to their level of dedication to inspiring the vision among all young people that their bodies are powerful, extraordinary, and worth protecting. We extend our sincere gratitude to all of those who helped make publication of this curriculum possible. We would also like to express our appreciation to Phoebe Boyer, President and Chief Executive Officer of The Children's Aid Society, for her support of Above the Waist.

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About the Children's Aid Society

The Children's Aid Society (Children's Aid) helps children in poverty to succeed and thrive. We have been serving children for over 160 years, a longevity that is a testament to our ability to adapt to the ever-changing needs of today's youth.

Today, Children's Aid serves New York's neediest children and their families at more than 40 locations in the five boroughs and Westchester County. Our caring begins even before birth, through prenatal counseling and assistance, and continues through the high school years with college and job preparatory training programs. All aspects of a child's development are addressed as he or she grows, from health care to academics to sports and the arts. And because stable children live in stable families, a host of services are available to parents, including housing assistance, domestic violence counseling, and health care access.

Throughout the history of Children's Aid, programming has been driven by the needs of the children we serve. This proactive approach started in 1853, when Children's Aid founder Charles Loring Brace established the Orphan Train Movement in response to an epidemic of homeless children. This approach, which moved children from New York City streets to the homes of farm families out West, has been deemed the beginning of the modern foster care system.

Children's Aid has continuously been at the forefront of children's services. The first free school lunch program, the first industrial school for poor children, the first day care program for working mothers, and the first visiting nurse service were all Children's Aid initiatives.

About the Children’s Aid Society Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program

In 1984, Dr. Michael A. Carrera and The Children’s Aid Society developed The Children’s Aid Society Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program (CAS-Carrera). The program uses a holistic, “above the waist” approach to help young people develop personal goals and cultivate the desire for a productive future; to develop their sexual literacy; and to educate them about the consequences of sexual activity. CAS-Carrera is currently serving nearly 4,000 young people in neighborhoods throughout New York City and partnership sites in Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. The programs operate in a traditional afterschool model and integrated school models in cities, suburbs, public schools, and charter schools.

Guided by a philosophy that sees youth “at promise,” CAS-Carrera builds participants’ capacity and desire to avoid pregnancy. For almost 30 years, CAS-Carrera has improved the lives of young people and their families and continues to produce extraordinary results. The CAS-Carrera program model is built on seven integrated components: Education, Financial Literacy, Family Life and Sexuality Education, Mental Health Services, Comprehensive Medical and Dental Care, Self-Expression, and Lifetime Individual Sports. For more information about replicating the full CAS-Carrera program in your community, please visit www.stopteenpregnancy.com or call (212) 876-9716.

CAS-Carrera Core Values

Holistic Sexuality

Sexuality is multi-dimensional, can be expressed in a variety of ways, and exists at all stages of human development.

Sexual Literacy

Scientifically-accurate, non-judgmental, research-driven, and age- and stage-appropriate sexuality education discredits myths and misinformation and increases one’s ability to make safe, healthy decisions.

Positive Youth Engagement

As practitioners, we must approach young people with gentleness, generosity, forgiveness, affectionate action, and the attitude that they are pure potential.

Above the Waist Approach

The sexual learning of adolescents must include an exploration of feelings, relationships, personal boundaries, personal values, body image, gender roles, and sexual identity—not simply sexual acts, contraception, and safer sex.

About Above the Waist

What is Above the Waist?

Above the Waist is a new middle grades sexuality education curriculum based on 30 years of experience and rigorous, evidence-based practice of The Children’s Aid Society Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program (CAS-Carrera). Rooted in a philosophy of holistic sexuality, the goals of Above the Waist are to advance age-appropriate sexual literacy and build competence, confidence, and connectedness among participants to ignite the desire to make safe, healthy decisions during adolescence and into adulthood. Above the Waist is organized into four chapters and addresses 12 key subject areas:

Your Brain

Adolescent Brain Development
Healthy Risk Taking & Decision Making
Social & Emotional Changes of Adolescence

Your Body

Physical Changes of Puberty
Sexual & Reproductive Anatomy

Your Rights

Personal Values & Personal Boundaries
Healthy Relationships
Sexual Identity
Assertive Communication Skills

Your Responsibility

Reproduction*
STD Prevention*
Pregnancy Prevention*
* 7th and 8th grade only

Vision

All young people will have access to developmentally-appropriate, positive, and respectful sexuality education as part of a community-wide approach to preventing pregnancy and STDs.

Mission and Approach

1. To provide age-appropriate, engaging, and meaningful sexuality education to young people in the middle grades.
2. To offer user-friendly sexuality education curriculum for instructors of all levels of experience.

We believe the most effective sexuality education teaches young people *how* to think about sexuality not *what* to think. Above the Waist applies discovery learning, attitude exploration, and learner-centered skill building activities to ignite the desire among participants to seek healthy, safe, and fulfilling relationships during adolescence and into adulthood. We believe that well-trained instructors who feel competent and confident in their roles create environments that support the learning of all young people.

Above the Waist uses creative, innovative strategies to create student-centered, discovery-based learning experiences that address all aspects of adolescent sexuality and guide participants to embrace their bodies as powerful, extraordinary, and worth protecting.

Above the Waist was developed using the National Sexuality Education Standards: Core Content and Skills, K–12 developed by the Future of Sexuality Education and the SIECUS Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten through 12th grade, 3rd Edition.

Theoretical Framework

Above the Waist is rooted in several key components of Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory:

1. Learning takes place in a social context.
2. People learn from one another through active observation, imitation, and modeling.
3. Intrinsic reinforcement (internal rewards such as pride, satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment) influences learning and behavior.
4. Learning does not necessarily lead to a change in behavior.

The curriculum is structured around interactive, group work in which participants are given opportunities to discover new information and observe peers engaging in challenging discussion, scripted and non-scripted role plays, and critical decision making. Each lesson in Above the Waist follows Bandura's theory that the pattern of attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation leads to effective learning.

Each lesson begins with a "connectedness" activity to build social connections among participants. Each lesson then progresses to a "competence building" activity designed specifically to maintain the attention of early adolescents through novel experiences and movement. Each lesson concludes with "confidence building" activities that encourage participants to explore attitudes and/or help participants build skills and find the intrinsic motivation to transform information into behavior change. Through building confidence, competence, and connectedness, participants will cultivate the desire for safe and fulfilling sexual relationships when they are older and the self-efficacy to make healthy choices during adolescence and throughout adulthood.

Why did CAS-Carrera create Above the Waist?

As our evidence-based, seven-component program has flourished over the past 30 years, we have felt compelled to share the overwhelming success we have experienced in reducing teen pregnancy among the young people we serve. We recognize that while full replication of the program is cost prohibitive to some, we can provide the larger interested community with our at once time-honored and innovative approach to holistic sexuality education, a key component of our ongoing success. We are proud to see Above the Waist join the growing number of sexuality education curricula that reach beyond educating young people about the truth and consequences of genital sexual expression to bring much needed attention to underemphasized, albeit critical, elements of sexuality education and sexual literacy.

.....
*Orthodoxy has failed.
It is time to take risks.
Be daring.*

Dr. Michael A. Carrera, Founder
and Director CAS-Carrera
.....

The first iteration of Above the Waist highlighted the idea that sexuality is holistic and is evident in every part of our lives. The content was clear and the engagement strategies were stimulating, but the curriculum lacked a core message. Additionally, the activities depended on the instructor being an “expert” in adolescent sexuality and adolescent development. After an initial internal review, we set out to redesign Above the Waist so that it centered on a core message, allowed the participant a stronger voice, and supported the novice instructor.

During a late night brainstorming session we asked ourselves, “If Above the Waist participants take away only one clear message, what is it that we want them to know, to believe, to embrace?” The answer was immediately clear: We want all young people to know, to believe, and to embrace the idea that they are powerful, extraordinary, and worth protecting. And with that, the version of Above the Waist you see here began to take shape.

Embracing innovation, and at the same time staying true to our roots, Above the Waist is anchored in three core philosophies that have guided the success of CAS-Carrera for nearly 30 years.

1. The brain is the most important sexual organ in the body.
2. Self-esteem is caught, not taught.*
3. We do not teach young people what to think...we help them to learn how to think, because we have full respect and confidence in their individual abilities.*

Key lessons from all three levels were field tested with 7th and 8th grade students at Thomasville Middle School in Thomasville, North Carolina and with 8th grade students at Bronx College Preparatory Charter School in the Bronx, New York. The verbal and written feedback from these field tests was applied to adjust content and engagement strategies and to scaffold social risk taking more appropriately to fit the developmental age and stage of the intended audiences. At the same time, we selected a group of diverse experts in the field to review the draft. The rich feedback we received from this group was invaluable in creating the final product of which we are enormously proud.

* Carrera, M.A. (1996) *Lesson for lifeguards: Working with teens with the topic is hope.*
New York, NY: Donkey Press

Meet the Developers

Lindsay Fram, MPH

Curriculum Development Coordinator

Nearly a decade and a half ago, Lindsay began her career teaching kindergarten in Houston, Texas. Her experience in early childhood education inspired her to pursue a Masters of Public Health with a focus on Maternal and Child Health and Health Education at the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. She then spent two years in Guatemala as a Peace Corps Volunteer working to improve elementary school health and designing an HIV education and prevention curriculum for middle and high schools that became the foundation for the Peace Corps-Guatemala HIV Intervention Program. Upon returning to the United States, Lindsay taught Family Life & Sexuality Education as part of the CAS-Carrera integrated school model for four years before transitioning into her role as Curriculum Development Coordinator. Lindsay continues to present innovative ideas in the field of sexuality education at schools, community-based organizations, and national conferences such as The American Public Health Association Annual Conference, Center for Family Life Education National Sex Ed Conference, and SXSWedu.

Jean Workman, MA

Community Liaison/Family Life and Sexuality Education Content Specialist

Jean Workman has worked in the field of adolescent sexuality education for over 20 years. While she began her career in HIV prevention, Jean has been dedicated to working in adolescent pregnancy prevention for 17 years. Since 2011 she has served at the national level with the Children's Aid Society Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program providing trainings to replication sites and coaching Family Life and Sexuality Education Component Leaders. In addition, Jean co-authored a nationally recognized, award-winning, research-based curriculum for sexual health, teen pregnancy prevention, and parental involvement. She is a Master Trainer with the North Carolina Comprehensive School Health Training Center. Jean has served in many leadership capacities in North Carolina, including having served six years on the board of directors of the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Campaign of North Carolina and six with Partners for Healthy Youth Coalition. Jean continues to share her enthusiasm for inspiring competence, confidence, and connectedness with young people and creating a magical classroom experience at schools, community-based organizations, and state and national conferences. Conference presentation experience includes: the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Campaign of North Carolina, South Carolina Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, NC SOPHE conferences, NC TISHE (Training Institute in Sexual Health Education), Center for Family Life Education National Sex Ed Conference, and SXSWedu. Jean is considered a leader and resource in the field of adolescent sexuality throughout North Carolina. Jean has a Bachelor of Science degree in Community Health Education and a Master of Arts degree in Nonprofit Management.

Michael A. Carrera, EdD

Vice President, Adolescence Division of the Children's Aid Society

Dr. Michael A. Carrera is the Thomas Hunter Professor Emeritus of Health Sciences at Hunter College of the City University of New York and Adjunct Professor of Community Medicine at The Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York. He began his teaching career in 1959 at a Junior High School in the Bronx. Since 1970, Dr. Carrera has directed the Carrera Program for The Children's Aid Society in New York, where he also serves as Vice President of the Adolescence Division. He has received many awards for his life's work to eradicate teen pregnancy, including Advocates for Youth's Supernova Award, The Robin Hood Foundation's Hero Award, The Child Welfare League of America's Florence Crittenton Award, Planned Parenthood's Mary Lee Tatum Award, and the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists' Award for Distinguished Service in Sexuality Education.

Getting Started

How to use Above the Waist

Session Title

We chose clever session titles to make reading the curriculum more fun. Feel free to share the names of the sessions as you see fit or to modify them to meet the needs of your participants.

Objectives

Sessions were purposefully designed to progress from discovering information to exploring attitudes to building skills. The learning objectives follow that pattern.

Key Questions

Each key question relates to one or more learning objectives. Asking key questions provides a sense of the extent to which participants are accomplishing the learning objectives.

Takeaway

These are the main ideas your participants should be able to summarize at the end of each session or series of sessions if you are stretching out one topic over time.

Vocabulary

The vocabulary list is not intended for formal review, rather as a guide to help you prepare for each session. Vocabulary words that appear in the lessons can be found in the glossary.

Title of Activity

We chose clever activity titles to make reading the curriculum more fun. Feel free to share the names of the activities as you see fit or to modify them to meet the needs of your participants.

Group Size & Time

This tells you if the activity should be conducted with the whole group, in pairs, or in small groups, as well as the suggested amount of time the activity should take, including discussion. Recommended size for small groups is four to five participants.

Purpose

This explains the specific goals of the activity within the context of the learning objectives and which of the 3 C's (competence, confidence, or connectedness) the activity is building

Materials

Take note of whether the materials are listed for individuals, pairs, small groups, or the whole group. If possible, laminate all cards that are used for games.

Do

Directions for the activity.

Ask

Use these questions to facilitate a large group discussion at the end of the activity. If short on time, focus on the Key Question(s). The length of time needed for discussion will depend on the prior knowledge and level of interest of your participants.

Say

This provides transition statements between activities and summary statements at the end of each session. Use the language provided as a guide, and modify it to meet the needs of your participants and your style of instruction.

Extension Activities

These activities take learning objectives to a deeper level and encourage participants to make a more personal connection with the topic. Extension activities are a great way to extend a single topic over the course of several sessions.

Unique Features of Above the Waist

Building the 3 C's: Competence, Confidence, Connectedness

Young people are more likely to engage in a behavior when they have the skills required to execute the behavior, the personal belief that they are capable of executing the behavior successfully, and the support of a network of peers and trusted adults. Each session in Above the Waist builds participants' competence, confidence, and connectedness to support the goal of igniting their desire to make safe, healthy decisions during adolescence and into adulthood.

Scaffolding Social Risk Taking

Similar to instructional scaffolding, which helps learners master skills by providing support during the learning process, scaffolding social risk refers to gradually increasing the level of social, emotional, physical, and intellectual vulnerability experienced throughout a session and from one session to the next. Scaffolding social risk helps create a safe space for learning wherein participants feel open to participating in activities and large group discussions. The level of social risk for any activity can be modified to meet the needs of the participants in the group.

Healthy Risk Taking

Healthy risks allow adolescents to push boundaries and experience failure. Healthy risks require the same physical, emotional, and social vulnerability as unhealthy risks, without the danger of serious, life-threatening consequences that are common of unhealthy risk taking behaviors (e.g., driving too fast, consuming alcohol, and unsafe sexual behavior). Taking healthy risks during adolescence helps build competence, confidence, and connectedness and refines decision-making behavior. Examples of healthy risk taking include trying out for a school play, learning a new sport, or talking to a crush. Above the Waist sessions provide opportunities for healthy social risk taking in a safe environment and emphasize:

1. Learning to assess level and type of risk.
2. Identifying opportunities for healthy risk taking in the context of safe environments.
3. Encouraging the brain-body connection.

Participant as Expert

Above the waist was designed with the idea that adolescents can be trusted to make safe, healthy decisions if given the right tools. Sessions are anchored in discovery-based learning activities that elevate instruction from lecture to active engagement and passive learning to movement-based activity. The role of the Above the Waist instructor is to guide participants to discover, explore, examine, and analyze information, attitudes, and societal and personal values.

Session Objectives

The majority of Above the Waist sessions were intentionally designed around three complimentary learning objectives: one that addresses knowledge; one that addresses attitude exploration; and one that addresses skill-building.

Unique Features of Above the Waist (Continued)

Order of Activities

Most sessions are comprised of four distinct types of activities in the following order:

1. **Energizer**—The purpose of the energizer is to increase oxygen to the brain through movement, build connectedness among participants, and introduce the topic for the session. Energizers usually take about 5 minutes and are critical to engaging participants. Even if you are short on time, it is highly recommended that you do not skip the Energizer.
2. **Information Giving**—The purpose of information giving activities is to introduce new material or review material learned in a previous session. To every extent possible, these activities are learner-centered and allow participants to actively discover new information.
3. **Attitude Exploration**—The purpose of attitude exploration activities is to provide opportunities for participants to explore their personal attitudes, engage in constructive discussions with peers, and take social risks in a safe environment.
4. **Skill Building**—The purpose of skill building activities is to provide opportunities for participants to build the self-confidence and self-efficacy needed to perform new skills by practicing in the presence of trusted, caring adults who can provide constructive feedback. When a topic is introduced for the first time, an additional Information Giving or Attitude Exploration activity may replace the Skill Building activity.

Flexible Framework

Each session was designed to last 55 to 60 minutes. The suggested timeframe for individual activities is printed beneath the activity title. The actual length of each activity will depend on the length of the discussion. To create a more flexible framework, we include suggestions for Extension Activities that can be used to extend a single activity over a longer period of time. Use these suggestions to extend sessions to meet your needs.

Instructor Cheat Sheets

Instructor Cheat Sheets provide detailed information about specific topics and suggested language for helping participants explore attitudes in a safe environment free of guilt, shame, or fear. We suggest you read Instructor Cheat Sheets before facilitating sessions in preparation for answering participants' questions.

Fascinating Facts

A page of Fascinating Facts are included at the end of each session. These can be used during a session to provide additional information to participants, sent home with participants as a vehicle for communicating with interested adults, or used by the instructor before the session to brush up on content.

Securing Parent/Guardian Permission

Before beginning Above the Waist, we recommend that you make parents and guardians aware that their child has the opportunity to participate in the program. Know the policy in your community, and if needed, create a parent/guardian notification letter that includes the information listed below. You may want to copy the letter on your organization's letterhead and include a copy of the session titles and/or learning objectives as well. Include the following information in a parent/guardian notification letter:

About Above the Waist

- Above the Waist is a sexual literacy curriculum developed by The Children's Aid Society Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program (CAS-Carrera).
- Above the Waist embraces a holistic view of sexuality and sexual expression, placing emphasis on adolescent brain development, social and emotional growth, exploration of personal values and personal boundaries, and the development of communication skills.
- The goals of Above the Waist are to advance age-appropriate sexual literacy and build the core capacities that ignite the desire among participants to make safe, healthy decisions during adolescence and into adulthood.
- Above the Waist guides participants in discovering that their bodies are extraordinary, powerful, and worth protecting!

About Your Program

- Above the Waist is a _____ week program for adolescents in _____ grade.
- This series is offered through the _____ and will be facilitated by _____.
- This program is sponsored by _____.
- If you have additional questions about the program, please call or email
_____ at _____.
- Parental/guardian permission must be obtained before any young person can participate in Above the Waist. Please complete the permission form and return it to
_____ by _____.

Getting Started Checklist

We have provided a checklist to help get you started that provides some suggestions for things to think about before launching Above the Waist in your community.

Before Beginning Above the Waist

- Do I have the support of my community to implement Above the Waist?
- Have I reviewed the curriculum with my administration?
- Did I send out a parent notification letter?
- Have I received signed parent notification letters from all expected participants (if necessary)?
- Do I have a safe space that can accommodate the size of my group?
 - Is the space comfortable (i.e. is there space for everyone to sit and space to spread out)?
 - Can we close the door or otherwise not be heard by others?
 - What is the protocol for allowing other adults in the room during Above the Waist sessions?
 - What is the protocol for handling the disruptive and/or unsafe behavior of participants?
- Depending on the time of day, can I provide a snack or meal to all of my participants?
- Am I familiar with resources in my community (including adolescent reproductive health service providers and mental health service providers) to which I can refer my participants, if needed, on a case-by-case basis?
- Am I familiar with the sexuality education laws in my state and/or community?
- Am I familiar with the adolescent reproductive health access laws in my state and/or community?
- Do I know where I can get clarification on subject matter before facilitating sessions?
- Have I prepared name tags for all of my participants, or do I have materials for them to create name tags upon their arrival?
- Have I reviewed all of the sessions for timing and made accommodations for the length of time I have available for each session?
- Is there time for a celebration and closure event after we have completed all of the Above the Waist sessions?

Resources

Understanding the Adolescent Brain

For decades people believed that by approximately five or six years old the brain stopped developing and that one's character traits, strengths, and weaknesses were more or less set in stone. Recent research in the area of adolescent brain development suggests otherwise. As suggested by Dr. Jay Geidd, neuroscientist at the National Institute of Health, character traits, strengths, and weaknesses are not set in stone by the time adolescence occurs.¹ Rather, the adolescent brain is more like a block of granite ready to be sculpted into a brilliant work of art.¹

Brain Plasticity

"Brain plasticity" refers to the idea that the brain is malleable and changes throughout the lifespan in response to new experiences, new information, and learning new skills. The adolescent brain has enormous potential and capacity for change.

The "Use It or Lose It Principle"

The "use it or lose it principle"¹ refers to the idea that the cells (neurons) and connections (synapses) that are used during adolescence will grow and get stronger (use it!), and the ones that are not used will wither and die (lose it!). If a young person is getting exercise, playing an instrument, or learning a new language, those are the connections that get stronger. But, if they spend time playing video games and watching TV, those connections will thrive. For this reason, we encourage adolescents to "use" their connections wisely.

Risk Taking & Decision Making

The adolescent brain is hard wired to take chances, seek novelty, and respond to socially rewarding behavior.¹⁻⁴ Recent research in the field of adolescent brain development, risk taking, and decision making suggests the following:

- Adolescents often overestimate the likelihood of negative consequences related to unhealthy risk taking (e.g., the risk of HIV from sex without a condom or the risk of an accident when driving while intoxicated).²
- Adolescents are more likely to make decisions about risk by weighing pros and cons as compared to adults, who are more likely to rely on gut instinct. This is especially true about extreme risk taking behaviors.³
- Compared to adults, adolescents have a more difficult time interrupting a behavior that is already underway.

Much of the explanation for poor decision making and unhealthy risk taking during adolescence rests in the difference between the highly developed limbic system and the underdeveloped prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for planning, organization, and understanding long-term consequences; it is not fully developed until the mid to late 20s. The limbic system regulates emotion and pleasure, and it recognizes rewards. By adolescence, the limbic system is nearly fully developed and values social acceptance more so than other rewards such as food, money, or sex. During adolescence, the prefrontal cortex is overpowered by the reward-seeking limbic system. Though it nearly goes without saying, making decisions this way can lead to dangerous risk taking.

Risk taking during adolescence is critical to personal growth, self-discovery, and moving down the path toward independence. Though we must assume that adolescents will take risks as they develop, with proper guidance and trusted adults to rely on, adolescents are capable of making safe, healthy decisions and choosing healthy risks over dangerous or unhealthy risks.

Understanding the Adolescent Brain (Continued)

Healthy Risk Taking

Healthy risks allow adolescents to push boundaries and experience failure. Healthy risks require the same physical, emotional, and social vulnerability as unhealthy risks, without the danger of serious, life-threatening consequences that are common of unhealthy risk taking behaviors (e.g., driving too fast, consuming alcohol, and unsafe sexual behavior). Taking healthy risks during adolescence helps build competence, confidence, and connectedness and refines decision-making behavior.⁵ Examples of healthy risk taking include trying out for a school play, learning a new sport, or talking to a crush.

Brain-Body Connection.

The autonomic nervous system, which includes the medulla oblongata and the lower brain stem, is responsible for basic survival. These parts of the brain are fully developed long before adolescence. The majority of the functions controlled by the autonomic nervous system are involuntary and include regulating the cycle of hunger and digestion, the sex drive, heart rate, respiration, and the “flight or fight” response. When the brain senses danger, it sends out signals either to put up a fight or to take flight (run away). This system is very sensitive to unhealthy risk taking and sends out alerts that create the feeling of butterflies in the stomach and increase the sweat response. Some people refer to this as a “gut instinct.” Encouraging young people to rely on their gut instincts to make decisions, rather than relying on step-by-step decision-making models, increases the likelihood they will make safer decisions “in the moment.” Cultivating the mind-body connection and teaching adolescents to pay attention to gut instincts can help them avoid the pitfalls of unhealthy risk taking.

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