



[ROBESON COUNTY]

TALKING MEDIA LITERACY AND GENDER EQUALITY WITH CURRENT/EXPECTANT PARENTS

Rape Crisis Center of Robeson County

A 2007 community needs assessment conducted by the Rape Crisis Center of Robeson County (RCCRC) revealed a large number of babies were being born to women with substance abuse issues. Knowing the multitude of risks these children were likely to face, Executive Director Margaret Crites reached out to Our House, the local residential treatment center, with a proposal: she and her staff would offer classes for expectant and current parents in the facility to help them prepare for a challenge all caregivers face –raising children with healthy ideas about sexuality and gender and teaching them to be critical consumers of media.

Eight years later the Parenting Program continues, offering parents a safe space to build skills and confidence to teach children healthier expectations about their bodies, their identities, and their relationships. The class meets once a week for eight weeks and is led by a trained facilitator from RCCRC. Activities include arts and crafts, games, group discussion, films, and reading, centered on the theme of breaking down rigid gender roles and the taboos that preclude open discussions about sex and our bodies. The program also focuses on helping parents build up their support systems in preparation for leaving the center. Research shows that both harmful gender norms and lack of social support are risk factors shared by at least six forms of violence [CDC, 2014], including the sexual violence RCCRC strives to prevent.

The program is highly replicable and adaptable to various audiences and settings, and it has proven popular with a variety of groups. After its initial implementation in the inpatient substance abuse treatment setting RCCRC took the program to transitional housing and adult literacy programs in Robeson County. “We find that with each audience group we do need to tweak it just a bit to fit in with the skills/needs of each group,” says Crites.

Growth
Theme

Gender equality,
Parent-Child
connectedness

Program
Type

Parent education

Program
Setting

Residential
substance abuse
treatment center

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Partnering with supportive organizations with existing audiences has been key to the program's success, and the key to those partnerships: good communication with support staff. Furthermore, having a complete, easy-to-follow curriculum makes it possible for both RCCRC staff and volunteers to be easily trained to adapt and deliver the lessons.

Regardless of setting, Crites notes that initial reluctance by program participants is a "fairly universal" challenge. By the end of the 8-week program, however, participants are consistently more open and accepting. To foster that openness and acceptance, facilitators must be comfortable discussing all forms of sex and sexuality, as well as hearing participant's personal histories. "It is amazing the level of misinformation and just wrong stuff people have learned/been taught regarding their bodies, sex, and sexuality."

The impact of the program is being felt in the community. Long-time program facilitator Jessica Drake has seen the positive results in program participants who, even months or years after completing the program, report they are better-equipped to "evaluate their own relationships" and make healthier decisions. Drake says she is often referred to as "the Parenting Lady" while out in public. She's pleased that the program has reached so many parents and is especially thankful for the partnership with Our House, where Parenting Program staff have been "received with open arms."

Adds Crites, "We have been able to reach an audience that we might not have been able to reach with a program *just* about sexual violence [...] the parents who have participated leave feeling much more confident in responding to their children as they hit new developmental levels, approach the teen years, and engage in relationships."

Aside from staff time, the costs associated with the Parenting Program are limited to materials for arts and crafts activities, copies of lesson worksheets, and copies of books for participants. Together, Crites estimates these expenses at approximately \$10 per participant. RCCRC may also provide incentives to parents to complete the course, but these are largely donated from the community. Examples include baby care items for expecting parents and personal care items for transitional housing clients.



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