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International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures

Feasibility trial of a film-based educational intervention for increasing boys' and girls' intentions to avoid teenage pregnancy: Study protocol[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 July 2014

Received in revised form 13 August 2014

Accepted 16 August 2014

Available online 6 September 2014

Keywords:

Teenage pregnancy

Sex education

Sexual health promotion

Intervention

Feasibility trial

ABSTRACT

The World Health Organisation, amongst others, recognises that adolescent men have a vital yet neglected role in reducing teenage pregnancies and that there is a pressing need for educational interventions designed especially for them. This study seeks to fill this gap by determining the feasibility of conducting an effectiveness trial of the *If I Were Jack* intervention in post-primary schools. This 4-week intervention aims to increase teenagers' intentions to avoid unintended pregnancy and addresses gender inequalities in sex education by explicitly focusing on young men. A cluster randomised feasibility trial with embedded process evaluation will determine: recruitment, participation and retention rates; quality of implementation; acceptability and feasibility of the intervention and trial procedures; and costs.

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1. Introduction

Teenage pregnancy remains a world-wide public health concern with rates in the US and UK among the highest in high-income countries (Finer & Zolna, 2011; Lawlor & Shaw, 2004). While teenage pregnancies have been gradually decreasing over the past decade, recent figures suggest pregnancy rates as high as 54.6 per 1000 women under 20 in the UK (ONS, 2012) and 67.8 per 1000 in the US (Kost & Henshaw, 2012). As many as half of these pregnancies end in legal abortion, reflecting the potentially unintended or unwanted nature of these conceptions (Kost & Henshaw, 2012; ONS, 2012). Although the life course for teenaged parents is not universally negative (Bonell, 2004; Duncan, Jarrett, & Harvey, 2010), the social disadvantage and exclusion that are linked to unintended teenage pregnancy are considered problematic (Harden, Brunton, Fletcher, & Oakley, 2009). Unintended adolescent pregnancy can lead to considerable adverse health problems for teenagers and their infants as well as generating emotional, social and economic costs for adolescents, their families and society (Beers & Hollo, 2009).

[☆] Trial registration number: NCT02092480.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2014.08.003>

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While unintended teenage pregnancy is a complex phenomenon that cannot be prevented through Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) alone (DiCenso, Guyatt, Willan, & Griffith, 2002; Elliott, Henderson, Nixon, & Wight, 2013; Fullerton, 2004; Henderson et al., 2007; Shepherd et al., 2010; Silva, 2002; Stephenson et al., 2003; Wight et al., 2002), it is recognised that high quality RSE provides teenagers with a solid knowledge base on which to make informed decisions about their sexual behaviour, as well as being a vital aspect of improving holistic sexual health and wellbeing (Downing, Jones, Cook, & Bellis, 2006; Ellis & Grey, 2004; Ingham & Hirst, 2010; Oringanje et al., 2009; Swann, Bowe, McCormick, & Kosmin, 2003). Reflecting the importance of RSE in the UK, the governments of Northern Ireland (NI), England and Scotland all emphasise the need to achieve a reduction of teenage pregnancy rates via the implementation of RSE in schools and see this as a key objective in their sexual health policies (Department of Health, 2013; DHSSPS, 2008; The Scottish Government, 2011).

In recent times, there has been recognition that teenage men have a vital yet neglected role in reducing teenage pregnancies (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2002; Lindberg & Kost, 2014; Marsiglio, 2006; Saewyc, 2012; Smith, Guthrie, & Oakley, 2005; Swann et al., 2003). When young men do receive RSE concerning pregnancy it is often via programmes and interventions that are directed towards girls and which ignore the fact that males and females are affected differently by gender norms and values relating to pregnancy (World Health Organisation, 2011). Thus, internationally, researchers and policy makers have called for targeted and scientifically evaluated RSE interventions which meet the sexual health needs of young men (Juszczak & Ammerman, 2011; Saewyc, 2012; World Health Organisation, 2011).

While some behavioural programmes targeting adolescent sexual risk-taking behaviour have demonstrated only modest success (DiCenso et al., 2002; Shepherd et al., 2010), systematic reviews have identified the characteristics of effective RSE programmes which might help optimise their potential impact on sexual risk-taking behaviours (Bailey et al., 2010; Guse et al., 2012; Kirby, Laris, & Rolleri, 2006; Kirby, 2007; Kirby, 2002; Noar, Pierce, & Black, 2010; Robin et al., 2004; Shepherd et al., 2010). These include the use of theoretically-based interventions targeting sexual and psychosocial mediating variables such as knowledge, attitudes, self-efficacy, intentions, perceptions of risk, and perceptions of peer norms which are theoretically linked to sexual behaviour change (Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Cane, O'Connor, & Michie, 2012; Michie, Johnston, Abraham, Francis, & Eccles, 2013; Ravis, Sheeran, & Armitage, 2009); the use of culturally-sensitive and gender-specific interventions (Marsiglio, 2006; Ries & Sonenstein, 2006); the use of interactive modalities which promote personal identification with the educational issues and engagement of young people (Bailey et al., 2010; Guse et al., 2012); the use of skills-building components (Oringanje et al., 2009; Wight, Abraham, & Scott, 1998); the involvement of parents in the RSE process (Grossman, Frye, Charamaman, & Erkut, 2013); and the facilitation of linkages with sexual health support services (Coyle et al., 1999).

The *If I Were Jack* intervention represents an innovative combination of these different components and is therefore predicted to decrease young people's sexual risk-taking behaviour in relation to avoiding teenage pregnancy. The aim of the study described in this protocol is to explore the feasibility of determining, in a cluster randomised trial, whether this combination of components can effectively increase boys' and girls' intentions to avoid an unintended teenage pregnancy.

2. Methodology

2.1. Background to the study

The study is a cluster randomised feasibility trial with embedded process and cost-effectiveness evaluations. The project began in May 2014 and will run for two years (see project flowchart, Fig. 1). Following the UK Medical Research Council's *Guidelines for the Development and Evaluation of Complex Interventions* (Medical Research Council, 2008), the current phase of research was preceded by focused programme development (Aventin, Lohan, O'Halloran, & Henderson, 2014) which involved identification of the relevant evidence base, development of a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of unintended teenage pregnancy in relation to young men, and exploratory mixed methods research examining the acceptability of the *If I Were Jack* interactive film among young men, teachers and RSE specialists (Lohan, Cruise, O'Halloran, Alderdice, & Hyde, 2011; Lohan, O'Halloran, Cruise, Alderdice, & Hyde, 2012).

2.2. Intervention

Informed by research on adolescent men's attitudes towards unintended pregnancy and the best available evidence on the components of effective RSE interventions, the intervention was designed to fit within the NI RSE curriculum by a team of researchers at Queen's University Belfast working with experts from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety NI, the Public Health Agency NI, and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in NI, as well as RSE specialists, teachers, parents and young people. Although produced in NI, the intervention will have strong cultural resonance for Ireland and the UK as a whole and could be adapted for use internationally.

This 4-week programme is composed of a number of elements (Table 1):

- i. *If I Were Jack* interactive video drama (IVD) which tells the fictional story of 16-year old Jack who has just found out that his girlfriend is pregnant. Seated at individual computers, pupils are immersed in Jack's story and are asked to consider how they would feel and what they would do if they were Jack;

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