

Levels of Community Change: A Game to Teach About Policy, System, and Environment Change

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INTRODUCTION

Health promotion organizations increasingly encourage multilevel, multisector interventions, because such approaches can produce more widespread and sustainable impacts than individual behavior change efforts alone.¹ Many public health agencies and foundations recommend or require that funded projects include policy, system, and environment (PSE) change activities. Growing numbers of health coalitions and youth advocacy programs inspire members to implement community-level changes. The Cooperative Extension System, which includes the *4-H Youth Development Program*, has adopted a National Framework for Health and Wellness² calling for strategies informed by the social ecological model (SEM) principle that behavior is influenced by multiple interacting factors.³⁻⁶ In reality, however, practitioners often lack familiarity with and confidence in applying PSE change strategies or find terms such as *policy change* daunting.⁷ Recognizing that educational games convey and reinforce knowledge,^{8,9} an interactive game was developed to help practitioners identify various PSE strategies, understand basic tenets of the SEM, and explore ways to initiate PSE changes. Feedback from 94% of 118 nutrition educators who engaged in the game

(n = 111) supports the efficacy of the game in meeting these objectives and points to the feasibility of its use with various groups.

OVERVIEW

The Levels of Community Change game was initially developed to teach teens serving as healthy living advocates¹⁰ about the SEM. Acknowledging youth advocacy as a promising health promotion strategy,^{11,12} the game was intended to provide a fun and engaging way to communicate SEM concepts, illustrate challenges involved in targeting health-related behavior changes at each level, and help teens view themselves as capable of engaging in environment change projects in their clubs and communities. The game's format is based on the experiential learning model, which is a key theoretical framework practiced in 4-H: engage in an experience, reflect on it, and apply what is learned to other situations.¹³ The game has been modified for a variety of audiences and used successfully with groups of teens, mixed groups of teens and adults, and professional audiences.

Game materials consist of health behavior scenarios, a large vinyl floor mat, and objects to toss at targets on the mat. The game mat has 4 concentric circles representing levels of the SEM, with square target areas that de-

crease in size and increase in point value as they move out from the center of the model to reflect increased challenges and potential wider, more sustainable impacts (Figure 1). Sets of customized health behavior scenarios developed for specific interest areas include public health, obesity prevention, healthy beverage choices, falls prevention, and local foods (Table 1). With adaptations, the game can accommodate as few as 4 players to >100 (Figure 2). In large groups, 1 game mat and facilitator is needed for every 12–14 players.

The objectives of the game are for participants to (1) identify a variety of influences on health behaviors at 4 levels of community change, (2) recognize the relative difficulty and potential impacts associated with strategies at each level of community change, and (3) explore ways to identify potential interventions targeting various levels of influence on health behaviors. Players read a health-related scenario, decide as a team what aspect of the SEM is represented, and attempt to toss an object onto the target corresponding to the identified level (Table 2). Debriefing afterward ensures that participants grasp the key concepts. Debriefing questions focus on the relative difficulty, potential impacts, and real-life pitfalls associated with strategies at each level of community change (Table 3). These questions can form the basis for ongoing discussions about how to become agents of change for healthier options in communities.

EVALUATION

To evaluate whether the game met its intended objectives, 111 of 118 professionals attending a nutrition education conference provided feedback after participating in a workshop on PSE change that included the Levels of Community Change game. On a 4-point scale (very helpful, helpful, somewhat helpful, or not very helpful),

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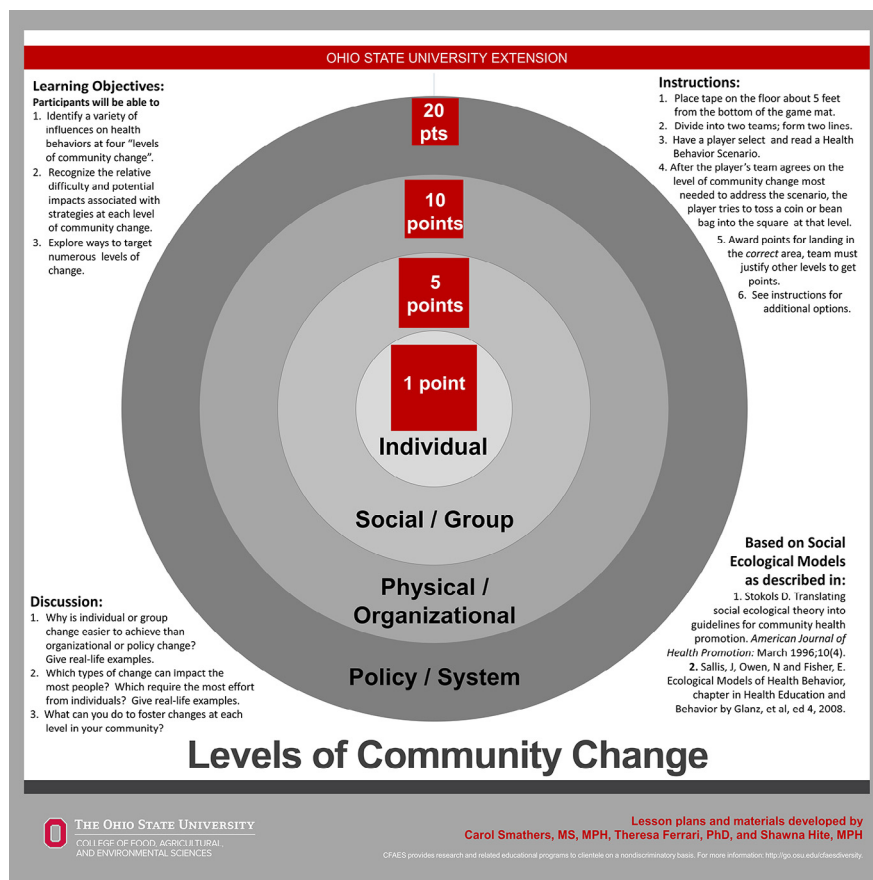


Figure 1. Levels of Community Change game mat.

most rated the game either very helpful or helpful to participants for recognizing real-world challenges and opportunities related to PSE changes (55% very helpful and 37% helpful); identifying how behaviors are influenced across levels (40% very helpful and 49% helpful); exploring ways to initiate promoting policy, system, and environment changes (48% very helpful and 39% helpful); and understanding the basic tenets of the SEM (35% very helpful and 50% helpful). More participants indicated that they thought the game was suitable for professional vs student audiences: *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program–Education* program or *Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program* staff (91%), community health coalitions (89%), public health and nutrition professionals (86%), college students (68%), high school classes (57%), and 4-H groups (49%).

APPLICATION

Those who work with professional or teen audiences may find the Levels of Community Change game helpful to introduce the concepts of the SEM to set the stage as part of larger

Table 1. Examples of Scenarios Used in Levels of Community Change Game Customized for Specific Health Interest Areas

Level of Change	Interest Area	Scenario
Individual	Healthy beverages	A high school sophomore thinks water tastes bad and drinks a 2-L bottle of cola every day.
Individual	Falls prevention	In response to an increase in reported falls, a community center offers a falls prevention class that teaches seniors to make changes to their homes, such as adding hand rails.
Social/group	Healthy beverages	Your coach insists that all players drink sports drinks before each game to stay hydrated.
Social/group	Obesity prevention/physical activity	Very few children in your community wear bike helmets because those who do are sometimes teased that they are uncool.
Physical/organizational	Healthy beverages	The vending machines at your community center do not have any water, milk, or diet soda.
Physical/organizational	Workplace wellness	The chief executive officer of company X signs a healthy workplace pledge to demonstrate a commitment to the health of his employees, but hesitates to enforce it because he fears getting complaints.
Policy/system	Healthy beverages	A local coalition tries to pass a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, but the beverage association outspends them and defeats the measure.
Policy/system	Obesity prevention/physical activity	A local school locks up its track and playground during non-school hours.

Note: Some scenarios can fall into >1 level, depending on how they are interpreted.

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