



## Healthy & Empowered Youth: A Positive Youth Development Program for Native Youth

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**Introduction:** During 2010–2012, Oregon Health & Science University's Prevention Research Center, a Northwest Tribe, and the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board, collaborated to evaluate the Healthy & Empowered Youth Project, a school- and community-based positive youth development program for American Indian and Alaska Native high school students.

**Methods:** The Native STAND (Students Together Against Negative Decisions) curriculum was enhanced with hands-on learning activities in media design to engage students in sexual and reproductive health topics covered by the curriculum. Guest speakers, field trips, and extracurricular activities were added to provide academic enrichment, engage students in cultural activities, and offer opportunities for career development. Students completed comprehensive pre- and post-surveys, and the authors conducted focus groups and key informant interviews with students and teachers. Data analysis was conducted during 2013–2014.

**Results:** Survey findings demonstrated improvements in student leadership and achievement, physical and mental health, and protective sexual health behaviors. The percentage of female teens reporting use of a condom the last time they had sex increased from 17% to 30%, and those who reported ever having been tested for sexually transmitted illnesses doubled from 12% to 24%. Focus group and interview findings indicated similar improvements in student self-esteem, life skills, health behavior, and engagement in community.

**Conclusions:** The Healthy & Empowered Youth Project educated and empowered Native high school students on a variety of sensitive health topics. The media enhancements were central to the program's success, reinforcing and personalizing classroom lessons and generating health-related videos and posters that resonated with family and friends.

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### INTRODUCTION

American Indian and Alaska Native youth are disproportionately affected by a number of health challenges, including drug and alcohol use, violence and self-harm, teen pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).<sup>1</sup> Structural and environmental factors contribute to these health disparities, including rural geography, high poverty rates, poor access to health services, stigma, and historical trauma.<sup>2</sup> Despite the immense need, few culturally relevant interventions have been designed for or rigorously evaluated among American Indian and Alaska Native youth.<sup>3</sup> In response, Oregon Health & Science University's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—funded Prevention Research

Center, the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board, and a Northwest Tribe collaborated to implement and evaluate the Healthy & Empowered Youth (HEY)

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Project, a multimedia school- and community-based positive youth development program that emphasized sexual and reproductive health.

### The Healthy & Empowered Youth Project

The HEY Project was delivered as a classroom course to students at the Tribe's junior/senior high school during 2010–2012. Students received an enhanced version of Native STAND (Students Together Against Negative Decisions), a culturally relevant curriculum that draws on teachings and values from across Indian Country.<sup>4,5</sup>

The curriculum consists of 27 sessions that are each 90 minutes; employs active learning methods; and holistically addresses healthy relationships, self-esteem, preventing STIs and early pregnancy, and avoiding substance abuse. To enhance the curriculum, teachers incorporated hands-on training in video production and media literacy, guest speakers, field trips, and after school and summer camp activities. The class was taught by two trained facilitators (one male, one female), who were employed as teachers at the school, and who received training from professional filmmakers.

**Table 1.** Description and Results of Composite Survey Measures (Positive Emotions)

Domain	No. of items	Scale anchors benchmark value	Composite index, M (SD)		Pre–post absolute change <sup>a</sup>
			Pre-survey (n=90)	Post-survey (n=90)	
Positive outlook	1	10 (very happy) to 0 (not at all happy)	6.85 (.26)	7.22 (.29)	+0.37
How happy would you say you are these days?			6.85 (.26)	7.22 (.29)	+0.37
Self-esteem	8	10 (strongly agree) to 0 (strongly disagree)	6.96 (.20)	6.85 (.21)	–0.11
I feel confident about reaching my goals.			7.91 (.28)	7.88 (.22)	–0.03
I smile and laugh a lot.			7.25 (.34)	7.98 (.31)	+0.73
I feel I am a person of worth.			6.90 (.27)	7.04 (.26)	+0.14
I feel I can't do anything right. <sup>b</sup>			4.46 (.31)	5.66 (.33)	–1.20*
Sometimes I think I am no good at all. <sup>b</sup>			4.91 (.31)	5.10 (.34)	–0.19
I feel that I am a failure. <sup>b</sup>			3.92 (.35)	4.43 (.38)	–0.51
I feel that I do not have much to be proud of. <sup>b</sup>			5.05 (.32)	4.65 (.33)	+0.40
I feel that my life is not very useful. <sup>b</sup>			4.68 (.38)	5.32 (.37)	–0.64
Good at making friends, empathetic, caring	2	10 (strongly agree) to 0 (strongly disagree)	6.78 (.20)	6.94 (.23)	+0.16
I am good at making friends.			6.78 (.25)	6.84 (.28)	+0.06
I care about others' feelings.			6.86 (.25)	7.04 (.28)	+0.18
Strong moral compass, values, responsible, helpful, hardworking	5	10 (strongly agree) to 0 (strongly disagree)	7.54 (.19)	7.61 (.17)	+0.07
I am helpful.			7.23 (.31)	7.26 (.38)	+0.03
I feel confident standing up for what I believe.			7.39 (.33)	7.58 (.31)	+0.19
I try to do my best.			7.92 (.28)	8.11 (.30)	+0.19
I try to take responsibility for what I do.			7.72 (.31)	7.86 (.30)	+0.14
I live by my values.			7.05 (.32)	7.12 (.30)	+0.07
Adjusts well and meets challenges	2	10 (strongly agree) to 0 (strongly disagree)	6.61 (.22)	6.96 (.23)	+0.35
I adjust well to new situations and challenges.			6.67 (.23)	6.85 (.25)	+0.18
I do a pretty good job dealing with obstacles.			6.51 (.27)	6.98 (.25)	+0.47

<sup>a</sup>Changes in the positive direction indicate an improvement (more favorable response) in the domain or measure.

<sup>b</sup>Scores for these questions were inversed for the calculation of pre–post differences and composite measure scores.

\* $p < 0.05$  by  $t$ -test.

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