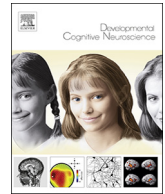




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Outreach and innovation: Communication strategies for the ABCD Study

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ABSTRACT

The Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study, a large, longitudinal study of brain development and child health, relies on the engagement of communities, educators, and families to ensure its success. To that end, community and partner relationships, development of targeted messages and materials for specific audiences (educators, families, youth, scientists), and continued and consistent outreach must be an integral part of the Consortium activities. The ABCD Consortium has made these efforts a priority and developed a framework to raise awareness about the study and promote sustained broad-base support from diverse stakeholders.

1. Introduction and guiding framework: principles of communication

The ABCD Study is a collaborative scientific endeavor designed to answer fundamental questions about adolescent development that have the potential to inform a wide array of policies and practices to improve adolescent health and wellbeing. The success of this endeavor hinges on partnerships with participants (approximately 10,000 youth aged 9–10 at recruitment) and their families, as well as educators, scientists, and interested organizations, all of whom are integral to and supportive of the research process (Balls-Berry & Acosta-Pérez, 2017). We use a cross-cutting theoretical framework to design and implement outreach and dissemination objectives for the study (Fig. 1) that draws on principles from multiple domains and is informed by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986): health communication (National Cancer Institute [NCI], 2004), social marketing (Kotler & Lee, 2008; McKenzie-Mohr, 2011), and community engagement. Community engaged research involves working collaboratively with segments of the population that have a special interest in the subject matter at the heart of a research program, which can in turn facilitate the adoption of research results to improve the health of a community (Balls-Berry & Acosta-Pérez, 2017; National Institutes of Health [NIH], Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2011). The following principles of the ABCD Study outreach framework guided the early and continued awareness efforts for the study: (1) identification and segmentation of target audiences; (2) gaining support from community leaders and stakeholder organizations who see value in the success of the study and without whose support the study would not exist; (3) development and

refinement of outreach materials for specific audiences disseminated through diverse platforms; and (4) feedback and evaluation of ABCD Study messaging and branding. These principles emphasize that communication must involve partners equitably and actively throughout the study engagement process (NIH, CDC, 2011), including scientists (ABCD Study investigators, research assistants, sponsors, as well as external scientists), educators and other local groups, study participants and their families, and partner organizations (e.g., health, mental health, and education professional organizations). Through an iterative process with ongoing feedback from target audiences, the framework underscores the importance of communicating information about the study in language that is clear, accessible and respectful; of listening to interests and concerns of stakeholders; and of translating and disseminating relevant findings in a timely manner (Sofaer et al. 2013; Wilson et al., 2010; McDavitt et al., 2016). Collectively, these efforts engage potential participants and other stakeholders from multiple paths – through schools via flyers, posters, and conversations with teachers and principals; organizations via emails and newsletters; and media through news articles and radio and television stories. Leveraging a multi-platform communication approach, all target audiences become familiar with the study in a relatively brief period and key stakeholders recognize the value of their contributions to the study. This familiarity can enhance ABCD Study awareness, bolster participant recruitment, and ultimately lead to sustained engagement, retention and study success (Cruz et al., 2016; Berry et al., 2014).

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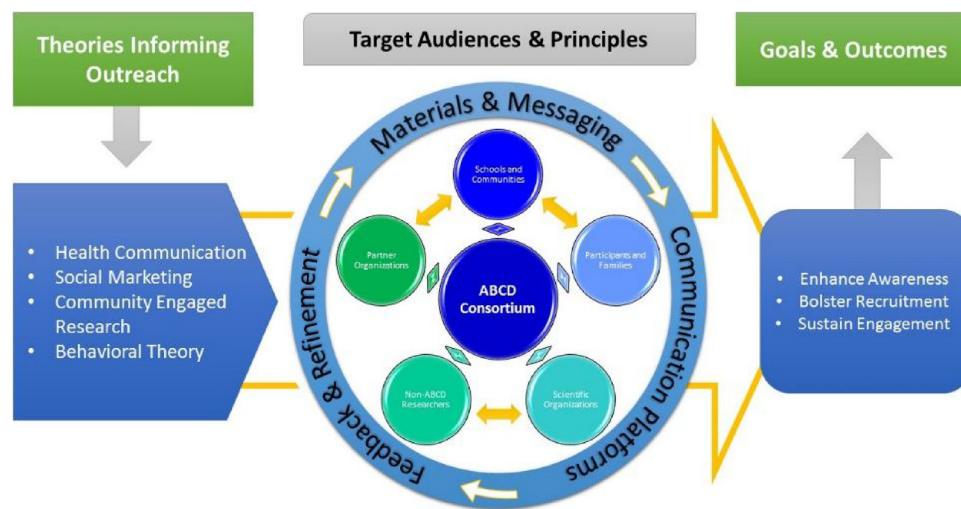


Fig. 1. Outreach & Communication Framework.

2. Engagement and awareness: building partnerships

An undertaking of this magnitude requires early buy-in from communities that are critical to its success, including scientists, educators, participating families and the media (NIH, CDC, 2011). For the ABCD Study, this community engagement began before the study was initiated. In 2014, the NIH engaged the extramural scientific community to better understand gaps in the scientific literature on adolescent neurodevelopment and to solicit input on the critical research questions and the best methodology and research design to address these gaps. From that point forward and upon initiation of the ABCD Study, the ABCD Consortium has continued to engage various constituencies who can impact and who will benefit from the study findings.

2.1. Partnership with the scientific community

During the early stages of planning for the ABCD Study in May of 2014, several NIH Institutes (the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the National Cancer Institute, the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute on Child Health and Human Development, and the National Institute of Mental Health) convened an expert panel workshop to obtain recommendations for general project design parameters for large-scale studies, as well as measures and domains for assessing developmental effects of substance exposure. This was followed by a formal Request for Information (RFI) and a satellite symposium at the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience where the extramural research community and other stakeholders provided additional input. These efforts informed the structural framework for the study, leading to the development of open solicitations that resulted in the current consortium. These early efforts also gave rise to the development and refinement of initial ABCD communications and messaging, including finalization of the study name and early discussions toward the need for a ‘look and feel’ for study materials (e.g., branding the study and designing the logo).

2.2. Partnership with educators

The ABCD Study will address the foundational aspects of adolescence that shape a person’s future, and could have profound impact on education policies and practices (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006), particularly given the established connection between health and academic achievement (Basch, 2010). By partnering with educators, the ABCD Consortium can (1) learn about the issues that are most important to local communities, (2) work with schools to ensure diverse

participation in the study, and (3) be a scientific resource for local educators.

The ABCD Consortium reached out to national leaders in the education community to inform them about the goals of the study and to learn what information they would value. Organizations that target school health professionals and school administrators, for example, were excited about the potential for the study to answer questions that could help them enhance academic success.

As described in greater detail in Garavan et al., *in press*, the ABCD Study is primarily using a school-based recruitment strategy to reach the majority of 9 and 10-year-old children in the study’s catchment areas (the geographic areas surrounding study sites). Therefore, national education organizations have been invaluable in reaching out to constituents highlighting the importance of their participation through letters of support that sites can provide to local schools and webinars, magazine articles, and social media to inform their members about the study. Outreach and dissemination strategies will leverage these partnerships to continue to learn about local educational needs and expand the awareness of the study as a resource for educators.

2.3. Partnership with health organizations

Another community that stands to benefit from the ABCD Study is medical practitioners, particularly in their role as public health leaders. The role of pediatricians, for example, has changed significantly over the past six decades (see Kuo et al., 2012). They are not just responsible for ensuring that children remain disease-free; they are also essential voices for parents in promoting wellness and health behaviors. Parents seek advice from them on how to establish healthy habits for their children (e.g., sleep, nutrition, physical activity, screen time limits). However, these medical practitioners need validated information that can only come from detailed longitudinal studies that evaluate child development from a multidimensional perspective. As such, they are key partners in helping to inform study development, raising awareness of the study among communities, and can help to sustain participant engagement.

The ABCD Consortium leadership reached out to national associations with a focus on child health such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the American Psychological Association, who have acknowledged that findings from the ABCD Study have the potential to help them provide enhanced health and mental health care for children and families (<http://abcdstudy.org/schools-partners.html>). These organizations, and others, also serve scientists who may be interested in analyzing ABCD Study data, and will be instrumental during dissemination

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