A Practical Guide for Assessing Age Appropriateness Among Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs

What is age appropriateness?

Age appropriateness addresses the relevance and suitability of topics, messages, and teaching methods in relation to the age or developmental level of their intended audience. There are multiple dimensions to consider when defining age appropriateness including social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. It is important to keep in mind that youth who are the same age or in the same grade may be at different developmental levels.

Part of the process of identifying and selecting a teen pregnancy prevention (TPP) program that is applicable to and suitable for a particular population and setting is ensuring that the program content and materials are age appropriate for *all* youth to whom the program will be delivered.

> **Age appropriateness** is more than the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development appropriateness of program content. It also includes the instructional strategies and teaching methods used in the program.

Why assess for age appropriateness?

Selecting an age-appropriate program ensures that the content and teaching methods are a good fit for the youth you serve, thereby increasing the chances that the program will have a positive impact on sexual health for youth in your community. It is critical to review all TPP curricula and materials to ensure age appropriateness prior to implementation and to make adjustments as needed.

> This guide includes checklists with a summary of the steps necessary for each phase. At the end of the guide, there is a list of additional resources to help you through the assessment process.

How to use this guide

This guide outlines a process that you can use to assess if the TPP curricula and materials you plan to implement are age appropriate for the youth being served in your community. It is divided into three sections corresponding with "before," "during," and "after" the assessment phases. Much of the information in this guide has been adapted from the Health Education Curriculum Analysis Tool (HECAT) – which was developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for use with general health curricula in school settings – to be applicable for grantees implementing TPP programs in various settings.

While there are a variety of ways organizations could approach their assessment of age appropriateness, OAH recommends that the process include a program review coordinator who will prepare for, facilitate, and oversee the assessment and a committee comprised of internal and external stakeholders to review the curriculum and materials. Multiple meetings will take place, the number and duration of which will depend on the number of curricula to be reviewed and the amount of discussion that occurs. At a minimum, you will need one meeting to help plan for the assessment and another to discuss the results of the assessment. At the conclusion of the assessment and discussion, a decision will be made about whether the curriculum chosen is age appropriate and what, if any, adaptations are needed.

Each section of this guide answers the following questions:
- What is the purpose of this phase?
- How does the program review coordinator prepare?
- Who should be involved?
- What should the committee review and consider?
- How long will this phase take?

Phase 1: Before the Assessment

What is the purpose of this phase?
The primary purpose of this phase is to introduce and orient reviewers to the process that will be used to assess the TPP curricula. There are three primary tasks in this phase: 1) identify a program review coordinator; 2) identify relevant assessment criteria for your community; and 3) develop a scoring rubric.

1. *Identify a program review coordinator*. The program review coordinator should be a staff member of the OAH-funded grantee organization who is familiar with the curriculum (or curricula) under consideration and comfortable organizing meetings and following up with committee members to make sure that tasks are accomplished in a timely manner.

2. *Identify criteria for assessment.* You will need to identify the criteria that will be used to assess the age appropriateness of materials for *your* community. While there are various sources for general criteria on age appropriateness (e.g., information from curriculum developers/distributors or the HECAT Sexual Health Curriculum module), you will also need to consider contextual factors that are specific to the community in which you intend to implement the program, including community norms and data on the existing knowledge, skills, and behaviors (especially related to sexual health) among the youth you plan to serve. It is essential to take into account the specific needs, behaviors, and developmental stages of the populations being served; these can vary widely, especially among particularly vulnerable populations such as youth in detention centers or youth in child welfare.

   Whenever possible, rely on community-specific information rather than state or national data.

3. *Develop a scoring rubric.* Finally, you will need to develop a scoring rubric that provides the reviewers with a clear sense of the assessment's scoring criteria and process.

How does the program review coordinator prepare?

The program review coordinator should prepare a summary of the population(s) being served, the program delivery setting, the results of the needs and resource assessment that was conducted prior to program selection and a description of all potential TPP programs under consideration. The description of the TPP programs should include overall program goals, the population and setting that the curriculum was originally designed for, instructional strategies used throughout the program, and relevant evaluation results. The HECAT General Curriculum Information form can be used to develop a general program description. The program review coordinator should also summarize relevant community-specific data from the needs assessment. All of this information (including the curriculum description) should be shared with committee members in the orientation meeting. The coordinator should also prepare a brief presentation to orient reviewers to their roles and responsibilities and should gather copies of possible assessment tools and scoring criteria for the committee to review.

If you've chosen to use the Sexual Health Curriculum module of the HECAT, the program review coordinator should go over the scoring process. If you plan on adapting the HECAT, or have identified some other assessment tool, the program review coordinator should provide reviewers with tools that clearly outline the process so that they can refer to them as they review the curriculum and materials.

Who should be involved?

When assembling a program review committee, it is important to include individuals who understand the population served, are familiar with the population's needs, and are cognizant of the norms of the community and setting in which the program will be implemented. Examples of such individuals include:

- Members of the Youth Leadership Council
- Parents
- Individuals who are familiar with the needs of the population served and implementation setting (such as school staff, clinic staff, staff from the juvenile detention center, etc.)
- Individuals who are familiar with the needs of the community (such as "community gatekeepers" and faith leaders)
- Local health professionals, especially those that address sexual health
- Grantee staff that have implemented sexual health curricula, preferably with a similar target population

TPP grantees are required to assess their curricula and materials for a number of other criteria, including cultural and linguistic appropriateness, LGBTQ inclusivity, and medical accuracy. While you do not want to have too many or too few committee members (i.e., fewer than three or greater than eight), you can streamline the review process by including individuals with expertise in multiple review areas. Further, be sure to select individuals who can commit the requisite amount of time to the full process since the committee members selected in Phase 1 will be involved throughout Phases 2 and 3 as well.

What should the committee review and consider?
In this phase, the committee members will review the overview of the program(s) assembled by the program review coordinator, learn about their respective roles and responsibilities for the review, discuss the criteria by which they will be assessing age appropriateness, and review and select an assessment tool (e.g., the Sexual Health Curriculum module of the HECAT) to guide the process. You may need to revise scoring criteria as a group, removing any items that are not appropriate based on your population, setting, or program, and adding any criteria that are needed to properly address the issues the committee wants to consider (such as cultural factors, state laws/policies, etc.). The Sexual Health Curriculum module of the HECAT has scoring sheets you might use or adapt (make sure to select the appropriate age band).
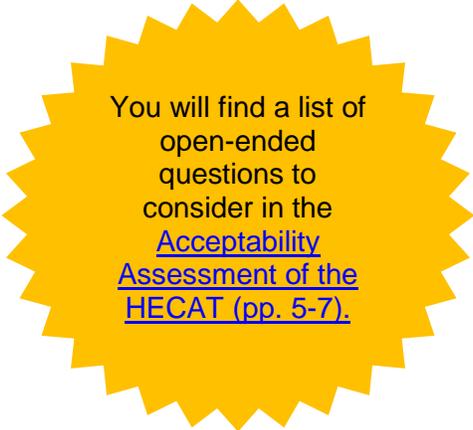
> You will find a list of open-ended questions to consider in the Acceptability Assessment of the HECAT (pp. 5-7).

If you are using an assessment tool other than the HECAT, you'll also want to spend some time discussing it as a group to make sure it is reflective of the youth you plan to serve. In addition to coming to a consensus about the review criteria, you'll also need to discuss the logistics of scoring. Finally, set aside plenty of time for reviewers to discuss any questions or challenges as a group.

There are many aspects of age appropriateness, and not all assessment tools will touch on every one. Be sure the assessment tool and discussion considers the following topics:

- The target population's physical development
- The target population's social development
- The initiation of relevant behaviors in the target population
- Reading level of instructional materials – and of youth to be served
- Clarity and interpretability of graphics and visual materials
- Appropriateness of teaching methods
- Youth's current knowledge, skills, and behaviors related to sexual health
- Community norms related to sexual health
- Relevance of curriculum content to youth in the target population

How long will this phase take?
The program review coordinator may need several hours to prepare for the initial meeting in addition to the time spent in the meeting with the reviewers. Reviewers should plan to attend a two-to-four hour meeting to accomplish the objectives of this phase.

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Phase 1 Checklist

☐ Identify a program review coordinator.
☐ Program review coordinator:
  ○ Prepares a summary of the population being served, program delivery setting, needs and resource assessment, and TPP curricula.
  ○ Identifies potential assessment tools, such as the HECAT Sexual Health Curriculum module, that can be used or adapted to guide the assessment process.
  ○ Recruits a team of program reviewers from the community. Include both youth and youth-serving adults. Consider recruiting members with knowledge of LGBTQ inclusivity, medical accuracy, and cultural and linguistic appropriateness.
  ○ Orients reviewers to their roles and responsibilities.
☐ Review committee meets and:
  ○ Reviews overview of the TPP program and the curricula to be considered.
  ○ Reviews and selects an assessment tool.
  ○ Identifies aspects of age appropriateness that the assessment tool may not fully capture.
  ○ Makes necessary revisions to the assessment tool and finalizes a corresponding rubric for scoring.

Phase 2: Doing the Assessment

What is the purpose of this phase?
The purpose of Phase 2 is to use your chosen assessment tool to review materials from the selected TPP program. By the end of this phase reviewers should have scores to discuss based on the rubric from Phase 1. Discussion will occur as part of Phase 3.

How does the program review coordinator prepare?
The program review coordinator should prepare for the assessment phase by providing reviewers with copies of the materials to be reviewed as well as the selected assessment tool and scoring criteria. The coordinator will also need to schedule the review meeting and provide reviewers with a clear timeline and expectations to guide their review.

Who should be involved?
These will be many of the same people that you identified for Phase 1. However, the conversations you had during Phase 1 may have made you realize that a particular perspective was missing. Remember, the curriculum review committee not only serves to assess your curriculum, but it can also promote community buy-in.

What should the committee review and consider?
In the assessment phase, each committee member should review curriculum materials against the chosen criteria using the scoring rubric that was developed in Phase 1. Reviewers should document all major strengths, weaknesses, and potential revisions and modifications for discussion in Phase 3.

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How long will this phase take?

It is typical for each reviewer to review the curriculum and supporting materials (or an assigned component/section) individually. The amount of time required for a thorough review will depend on the reviewers' comfort and understanding of the assessment criteria, the length of a curriculum (including supporting materials), and the number of curricula to be reviewed.

Phase 2 Checklist

☐ The program review coordinator reviews the process to build reviewers' capacity in using assessment tools.

☐ Reviewers are provided with the assessment tool necessary to score the curriculum.

☐ Reviewers are assigned a curriculum and materials to review and given a timeline.

☐ Phase 3 meeting is scheduled within one week of completion of this phase.

Phase 3: After the Assessment

What is the purpose of this phase?

The purpose of Phase 3 is to make a decision about whether the materials are age appropriate for the youth that you intend to serve. Phase 3 is where the discussion of the reviewed curricula and materials based on the reviewers' assessment takes place.

How does the program review coordinator prepare?

The program review coordinator should check in with reviewers a day or two before the meeting to ensure that they have had adequate time to review the curriculum and materials. The program review coordinator should also prepare a brief presentation to re-orient reviewers to their roles and responsibilities and establish ground rules for discussion of disagreements on scoring. If more than one curriculum is being reviewed, the program review coordinator must be prepared to facilitate a discussion comparing the strengths and weaknesses of each curriculum. If reviewing multiple curricula, additional meetings may be required.

Who should be involved?

This meeting should involve the program review coordinator and all those who completed the review.

What should the committee review and consider?

Reviewers should discuss the results of their review, focusing their discussion on whether they found the curriculum to be age appropriate and supporting their assessment with the scores they assigned during Phase 2. In particular, it is important to spend time discussing identified weaknesses and potential changes. Don't expect that everyone will agree; while assessment tools like the HECAT can provide quantifiable data for review, the process is ultimately somewhat subjective. In fact, it is the discussion that will most inform your final decision. Because of the subjective nature of the assessment process it is critical that your reviewers be knowledgeable and representative of a variety of perspectives.

You may choose to discuss findings from Phases 2 and 3 with other grantees, and to contact program developers to explore possible adaptations. If major adaptations are needed to make the TPP program's curriculum and materials age appropriate, you may want to consider selecting another program that is a better fit for your target population and setting. If the committee makes a final recommendation to implement the curriculum with adaptations, those adaptations will need to be approved by OAH. In addition, there should be a plan to pilot the adaptations prior to full implementation to ensure that the adaptations adequately address the committee's concerns related to the age appropriateness of the curriculum and materials.

How long will this phase take?
The amount of time is dependent on the length of the curriculum and on the extent to which reviewers' assessments differ. The program review coordinator should consider scheduling at least a two-hour meeting.

By the end of Phase 3, you will need to answer the following questions:
- Are there aspects of the program's curriculum and materials that are not age appropriate for your target population and your community?
- Are there adaptations that can be made to make the curriculum and materials age appropriate?
- Would the required adaptations be minor and require minimal time/resources?
- Which potential adaptations should be prioritized based on importance and resources?
- Does the committee recommend this program?

Phase 3 Checklist

☐ Review scores and discuss: 1) low scores and 2) areas of disagreement.
☐ If reviewers identify aspects of the curriculum that are not age appropriate, discuss potential changes to address those concerns (*adaptations must be reviewed by OAH*).
☐ Consider communicating with other OAH grantees reviewing the same program.
☐ If potential adaptations were identified, consider communicating with other OAH grantees or with the developer/distributor to discuss potential adaptations.
☐ Make a recommendation to implement the program without adaptation, to implement it with adaptation, or to continue examining other programs.
☐ Submit major adaptations to OAH for approval.
☐ If a recommendation is made to implement the program with adaptations, make plans to pilot the program with those adaptations to ensure that they address reviewers' concerns and are acceptable to youth participants and community stakeholders.

Additions may be considered minor adaptations *if they do not significantly affect the core components.* (e.g., adding icebreakers or a reproductive health session) or major adaptations *if they significantly change the core components* (e.g., combining implementation of another program with the EBP). Some additions are not considered adaptations because they are implemented to support the program and do not affect the program content or delivery (e.g., providing snacks, marketing the program, informing parents about the program). All potential adaptations should be discussed with OAH. Major adaptations must be approved by OAH before they can be implemented.

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Resources to Assist with a Review for Age Appropriateness

Health Education Curriculum Analysis Tool (HECAT)
http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/HECAT/

The CDC webpage on the HECAT contains a downloadable copy of the HECAT (including the Sexual Health module), an overview of the instrument and its purpose, and FAQs. Grantees can also purchase a printed, packaged copy of the HECAT.

Sexual Health Education Curriculum Analysis Tool (SHECAT) Video Series
http://www.k12.wa.us/HIVSexualHealth/SHECAT.aspx

This series of brief videos produced by the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction can assist grantees in using the HECAT, particularly the Sexual Health module, to determine what curriculum and materials to use.

State Curriculum Frameworks

Curriculum frameworks from state education departments often contain recommendations for content to be included by grade level. In particular, health education learning standards can provide information on what levels of instruction students are intended to receive at or by a certain grade level. Check with your state's Department of Education for standards specific to your community.

Reducing Adolescent Sexual Risk: A Theoretical Guide for Developing and Adapting Curriculum-Based Programs
http://pub.etr.org/upfiles/Reducing_Adolescent_Sexual_Risk.pdf

This e-book from ETR Associates discusses ways curricula can reduce adolescent sexual risk by focusing on risk and protective factors. It may be particularly useful for grantees considering making adaptations to programs based on findings from Phase 2.

Adolescent Development E-Learning Module
http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/resources-and-publications/learning/ad_dev/index.html

This brief interactive resource from OAH provides information on biological, cognitive, and social development in adolescents, and discusses strategies for engaging adolescents and promoting healthy youth development.

Teen Development
https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/teendevelopment.html

This page from the National Library of Medicine provides information about developmental changes experienced by adolescents, and contains an extensive list of hyperlinks to resources youth, parents, and professionals can draw on for information about physical, mental, emotional, and social changes that come about during adolescence.

Checklist for Assessing Age Appropriateness Among Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs

Phase 1 Checklist

- ☐ Identify a program review coordinator.
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  - o Prepares a summary of the population being served, program delivery setting, needs and resource assessment, and TPP curricula.
  - o Identifies potential assessment tools, such as the HECAT Sexual Health Curriculum module, that can be used or adapted to guide the assessment process.
  - o Recruits a team of program reviewers from the community. Include both youth and youth-serving adults. Consider recruiting members with knowledge of LGBTQ inclusivity, medical accuracy, and cultural and linguistic appropriateness.
  - o Orients reviewers to their roles and responsibilities.
- ☐ Review committee meets and:
  - o Reviews overview of the TPP program and the curricula to be considered.
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- ☐ If potential adaptations were identified, consider communicating with other OAH grantees or with the developer/distributor to discuss potential adaptations.
- ☐ Make a recommendation to implement the program without adaptation, to implement it with adaptation, or to continue examining other programs.
- ☐ Submit major adaptations to OAH for approval.
- ☐ If a recommendation is made to implement the program with adaptations, make plans to pilot the program with those adaptations to ensure that they address reviewers' concerns and are acceptable to youth participants and community stakeholders.

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