



Youth Health Education Theater
A Simple Guide to Producing Your Own Play*

A Note to the VV Volunteer

This document was created to empower youth to establish a community theatre group. Community theatre groups can serve as an educational forum for social and health issues while giving youth a way to express their core challenges. As a volunteer, your role is of a cheerleader and a facilitator; a person who keeps the momentum going through enthusiasm and encouragement. Remember that the main body of material and ideas must come from the participating community and to keep programs sustained well beyond your volunteer service, it's imperative to help to solidify group leadership by consensus.

Youth leaders

Below are some guidelines as you form and manage your own community youth theatre.

a. Your identity:

- Bring together the youth in your community to announce your plans to form a theater group.
- Create a mission. What is the broadest impact you hope to have on your community? Would you like to create thought-provoking, entertaining, educational, enlightening theatre? Try to say it in a sentence or two.
- Together, choose a name for your theater group that reflects your group goals and spirit.

b. Building a creative team:

- Involve your target population and build a creative team most able to address health education and adolescent issues.
- Give everyone an opportunity to join your group and give all a chance to express their ideas.
- Have Fun!!!

Build Community Support

a. Share the News

- Once you have made the decision to put on a youth health education theater production, tell everyone you know. This will help you get people involved and excited.

b. *Assess the needs of your community*

- Every community has special and often urgent needs. It is important that your production speaks to the specific needs and strengths of your community. Keep in mind:
 1. Teen beliefs and myths
 2. An effective method for presenting messages for youth.
 3. The play must be educational while entertaining.

c. *Define your audience, content and format*

- Is your audience just youth or the entire community?
- You might consider interviews and other means of research to narrow what you will cover in the play. It is assumed that you already have a specific topic you want to address with a play (i.e. AIDS awareness, teen pregnancy, unhealthy or unjust practices, etc.) Questions you might ask your youth group could include:

Do you have suggestions on how this issue could be presented in the play?

If you were creating a play on this issue, what kind of characters would you have?

What kind of scenes?

The play needs to be a simple, short and low or no budget performance. This way it is able to travel and be staged in different areas to reach several members of the community. Most important:

1. Address key issues that are relevant to your community.
2. Identify a small number of priority messages.
3. Show both sides of an issue to create dialog after the show.

d. *Working with a Script*

1. Casting actors

- i. You can work with the students in your school or youth in your community, even if they have never performed before.

- ii. Youth of all ages should be included in on the casting of roles.
- iii. Screening questions should be included to determine the actor's comfort with the subject matter.

2. Training Techniques

- i. You may want to spend some time training your actors and anyone else involved with the production. This may include:
- ii. Guest speakers on the topic, especially if controversial. This may include health education workers, social workers, and Village Volunteers who volunteer in your village, etc.
- iii. Health education exercises and theater games. See documents
- iv. No matter what your resources are, some amount of training is very important to:
 - 1. Create a climate of trust in the material and increase the comfort level of participants.
 - 2. Provide accurate information about the topics in the play.
- v. Keep in mind:
 - 1. Some teens may react emotionally to the material being discussed due to previous experience. Don't be afraid to discuss these issues through as the participants' growth and empowerment during the creative process is just as important as the audience's journey in the actual production.

3. Creating the script or working with a pre-existing story

- i. You can either create your own play, by coming up with ideas and scenes using a team of young actors, or you can use a pre-existing play as your template and then adapt it to your community's individual needs.
- ii. It is nice to have a balance of male and female, and younger and older characters if that matches your population profile. You can always adapt an existing script to have the desired number of characters and types of characters.
- iii. Tips on developing a script:
 - 1. Develop goals and objectives that you want to accomplish with the play. If using an existing play, assess if your needs are met with the play, and if not, work through some of the steps listed below to adapt it to your needs.
 - a. Outline key messages and information to be conveyed to the audience.

- b. Brainstorm and improvise ideas for characters, story lines, and scenes. Use theater games, techniques, warm-ups, provided as an attachment to this document.
 - c. Make the material relevant to your particular community. For example, is there cultural song, dance or folklore that is specific to the community and can somehow be incorporated into the piece.
 - d. Outline the story and determine character's conflict. (What will the main character or characters overcome in this story?)
 - e. Assign actors characters before the dialogue is written or to help rework an existing play.
 - i. Conduct theater games with actors in character.
 - ii. Have each actor write an essay, answering questions about their character's background, likes and dislikes, goals, etc. Have each actor go through an interview process with the rest of the group where they must answer questions as their character.
 - i. Ask the actors to improvise and write dialogue for their characters and scenes.
- iv. Ask teen PA's for feedback regarding storyline, characters and conflicts.
1. Key messages:
 - a. The importance of HIV and AIDS education.
 - b. What kind of HIV testing is available in your community?
 - c. What kinds of stigmas or cultural stereotypes prevent people from getting tested?
 2. Brainstorming and improvising:
 - a. After a group of students worked through many exercises, they came up with the idea to have two friends talk about an important family member who has just been diagnosed with AIDS.
 3. Story outline: Karen tells her friend Linda that her mom has AIDS.
 - a. Karen and Linda discuss Karen's mom and how she found out that she has AIDS.
 - b. Linda asks Karen if her father has it too.
 - c. Karen says she does not know and her father doesn't want to go get the test.

- d. Linda tells Karen that her uncle died of AIDS last year.
 - e. Linda tells Karen about the ways she knows you can get tested for HIV, which is what you get before you get AIDS and says most of her family has been tested.
 - f. Karen explains that just because you have HIV though doesn't mean you'll get AIDS. There are nutritional guidelines to prolong your life and sometimes medication is available.
 - g. Linda and Karen discuss the problems with getting medication.
 - h. Both Karen and Linda discuss their fears in regards to getting tested
 - i. Karen says she wants to get tested.
 - j. Linda says she wants to get tested too.
 - k. Linda gives Karen a hug and tells her how sorry she is about her mom.
 - l. Karen thanks her and says she just wishes her family had learned more about HIV and AIDS earlier.
4. After outlining the scene, the actors could improvise with the characters through exercises, develop the background of the characters, and develop dialogue.
 5. This is a good time to get feedback from others involved with the production, including teen PA's, to form a consensus in regards to the material's accuracy and relevance.
 6. It is good to test out the dialogue with select members of your target audience before performing the play. Have the actors read it aloud for presentations to the test audience and get audience reaction and feedback. This can be done with just a few people.

e. Developing the Production

1. Staging the production

- i. Here are the most important aspects of staging:
 1. Block the actors. Determine where and when they will move, walk, sit, stand for each scene. Make sure that no one is standing in front of characters and that the audience can see and hear everyone on the stage.
 2. Costumes. Actors can use their own clothes or create simple costumes if needed.
 3. Props. These are small items an actor might use during the performance, such as a glass, book, etc.
 4. The set. Use whatever would seem natural in the environment of the scenes, such as a chair.

5. Music. Music, like a simple drum beat can create a transition from scene to scene.
2. Working with actors and the creative team.
 - i. Develop a list of ground rules.
 - ii. Consider having some kind of opening and closing ritual.
 - iii. Meet with each actor individually every so often to see how they are doing and if they have any concerns or questions.

f. Reaching Out to Audience

1. Where to perform
 - i. Schools
 - ii. Community gathering spots
 - iii. Anywhere you can think of -- Market places or busy areas where interest can be invoked!
2. Evaluating the response
 - i. You can have a question and answer session following the performance.
 1. Make sure it is clear to the audience if they have questions or want more information, how to find it.
 2. Prepare some lead in questions to provoke responses and dialogue from the audience just incase they are not immediately so forthcoming with questions.

g. Where to find Funding and Support

1. Health Centers
2. Churches

h. Resources

1. Books
2. Community health educators
3. Other community groups doing similar theater based work in the area

*Adapted from "A Guide for Developing Youth Health Education Theatre," Kalihi-Palama Health Center, Honolulu, Hawaii.

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