

# recruiting

parents, supportive adults, and families into sex ed programs



Research shows that a strong connection between teens and their supportive adult(s) is a superpower that helps teens achieve their goals and supports healthy teen outcomes, including: decreased rates of unwanted teen pregnancy, STIs, depression, and drug and alcohol use, and increased school success. [1,2]

Communicating about tough topics - including sexual health - is an integral aspect of a strong connection. Although teens and adults alike say they want to talk with one another about sexuality, many families say that they feel uncomfortable and ill-equipped to have conversations with each other about sexual health topics, and this makes building strong connections very challenging.[3]

Since 2015, Planned Parenthood of the Great Northwest and the Hawaiian Islands has been implementing and evaluating Linking Families and Teens (LiFT), a 6-hour family connection program for teens aged 13-19 and their supportive adult. During this time, we recruited over 900 families in rural communities across the country for a randomized control trial to understand the impact that LiFT has on family connection, communication about sexuality, and teen sexual health outcomes. Through this evaluation, we've learned what works when recruiting parents, supportive adults, and families into a family-focused sex ed program and randomized control trial.

For us, recruitment success for LiFT was driven by interconnected elements that were mutually reinforcing:



We hope the lessons we learned can support the work you are doing to bring high-quality education programs to parents, supportive adults, and families in your community.

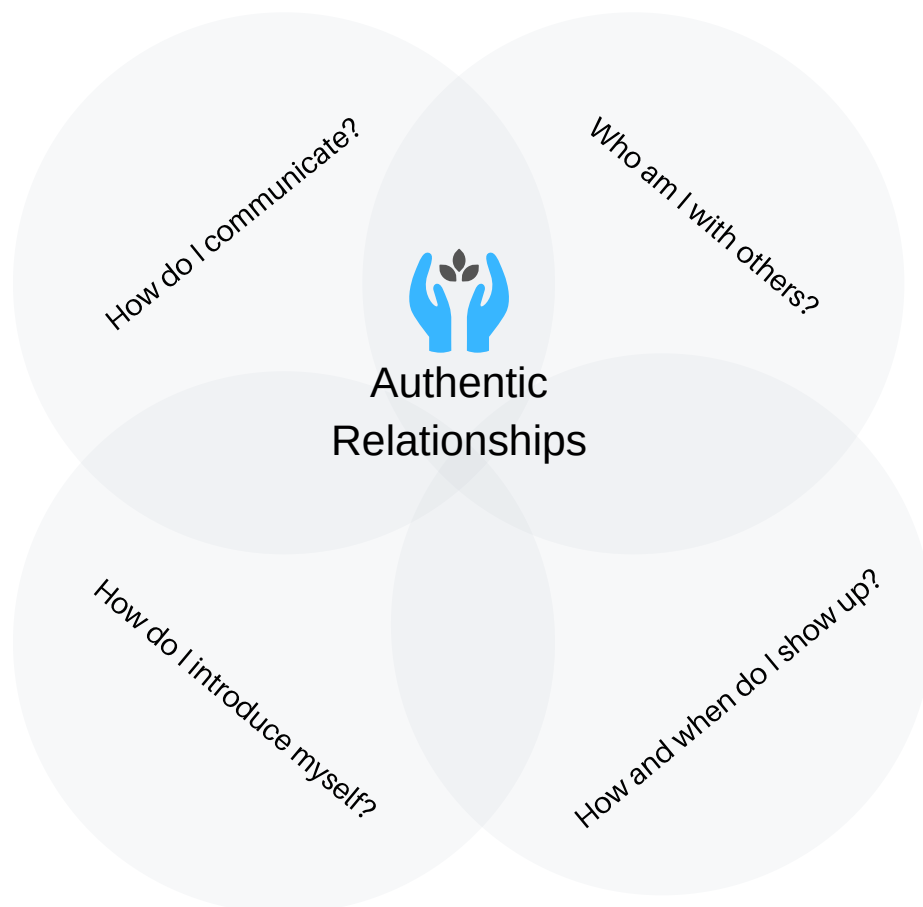


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## Building Authentic Relationships

Relationship building is the foundation of recruitment. It is an ongoing process that requires time and investment, as well as connection with community partners and members in real and authentic ways. Whether it was a community in which we hadn't worked before, or a community in which we had previously facilitated youth programming, it took time, in some cases years, to establish relationships that supported our family program. Here are our tips for building relationships:

- Create a realistic timeline which accounts for the time needed to build relationships - even in existing communities - before program implementation.
- Create goals in workplans and build time into schedules for explicit relationship-building activities.
- Build authentic relationships - Authentic Relationship Building (ARB) [4] is a reflective practice that can be used before, during, and after family programs to think intentionally about how you want to build relationships with individuals, partners, and community.
  - It involves ideas to internally reflect upon, and active steps to take, say, and do to build strong, reciprocal and respectful relationships with community partners and members.
  - ARB allows you to share layers of yourself to form connections with others, helps you be aware of your own needs and the needs of community members, helps you facilitate conversations effectively, and helps navigate power dynamics while being aware of your own safety and levels of support present.
  - The layers of yourself you share may look different from relationship to relationship.



## Layers of Authentic Relationship Building

**Who you are with others:** How you choose to define yourself, including your identities, personality, culture(s), spirits, or character, when building relationships. Reflect upon:

- What role(s) do you hold?
- What relationships do you have or have had with the person you are talking to, and how you have tended to those relationships previously?
- What perceptions of your organization are present?
- What parts of yourself do you want to share?
- Are there parts of yourself that you do not want to share – for your own safety or personal needs?
- Are there parts of yourself that will be noticed regardless of if you want to share them or not? What are ways you can feel safe and supported around these?

**How you introduce yourself:** The immediate pieces of yourself you share to create connection. Reflect upon:

- What values, identities, histories, or experiences do I share with this group that will lead to trust and connection right away?

**How you communicate:** Think about the important values and characteristics of the audience you are talking to - not only what you say but how you say it. Consider the communication methods you prefer and those that the community members you are communicating with prefer, the words you choose, formality, etc. Reflect upon:

- Different learning styles, literacy levels, ages, culture(s), values, customs, languages, trauma, accessibility considerations, and other needs that the group may have.

**How and when you show up:** Showing up on an ongoing basis for partners, participants, and community can lead to a true connection and deepen relationships over time. This means physically showing up to support community events, work, or advocacy needs, as well as being invested in other ways. Reflect upon:

- How do you support the work of your partners on an ongoing basis?
- How do you continue to stay engaged beyond this specific project?
- How can you speak up for common goals or intersecting issues?
- Are there people or communities that are missing from your partnerships?
- In what ways can you begin to build authentic relationships with them?

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## Meeting Community Needs

One of the reasons that families joined LiFT is because it met an unmet need in communities that supportive adults, youth, and partners were looking for. To understand these needs, LiFT began with formal and informal community assessments to understand the structure of programs that would work for families, as well as the content requested by families. This included 35 one-on-one conversations with community partners, 22 with high-school-aged youth, 24 with parents and caregivers, and a brief survey with 103 young people and 59 parents/caregivers. Topics included:

- Recruitment: Where to recruit, how to recruit, messaging ideas, incentives to participate, and perceptions of facilitating organization.
- Logistics: Program scheduling, barriers to participation, and accessibility ideas.
- Programmatic: Language and cultural considerations, content and topic wishes and needs, familial strengths, and known resources.

Understanding this information helped us design a program that families were excited about joining because it was rooted in their personal experiences, needs, and strengths.

## Program Messaging

Finding the right way to talk about LiFT was essential, but it took us time to design talking points that resonated with community members. Once we started talking to the community - teens, adults and partners - about what appealed to them about family programming and their goals for it, we were able to speak about LiFT in a way that enticed and excited potential participants. Lastly, it was important to have a personal conversation with potential participants to understand their specific family and their needs. This time spent building a personal relationship with potential participants was key in crafting family-specific messages.

The following themes were most important in our messaging work:

- It was important to highlight the personal relevance and real-life application of the program to the specific individual and family, as well as the broader community.
- Partners were most excited about families building communication skills to talk about tough topics.
- Parents and supportive adults responded most to the opportunity to support, spend time with, and bond with their young person. Adults were also excited to meet other adults and share and learn from each other.
- Young people responded most to spending time with friends and a trusted facilitator, and finding out that their adults will be learning skills to actually listen to what they are saying (as opposed to jumping to conclusions).
- It was important to clarify that family members wouldn't be talking about sex that day with each other.
- Both youth and adults suggested focusing on communication & relationships to avoid discomfort and stigma associated with sexuality and sex education.

# recruiting

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## Addressing Barriers

There are many reasons why families don't want to, or can't, participate in sex ed programs. It was important to proactively address these barriers as much as possible to help families attend. Here is how we addressed barriers:

**Childcare** - For families with children too young to participate in LiFT, we made sure to offer a variety of childcare options, including on-site - either volunteer or paid - or a gift card ranging from \$10-75 to help reimburse childcare costs.

**Transportation** - For families that didn't have secure transportation to the LiFT site, we provided a small gas gift card, helped coordinate carpooling, paid for ride-shares, and used a church van to help transport families.

**Competing demands** - It's hard to get both youth and adults in a space together for six hours, so we tried to schedule LiFTs for times when there weren't large school or community events, such as religious services or "busy-season" at major community employers. It was also important to be understanding and flexible when last-minute priorities came up for participants. Lastly, many highlighted the fact that LiFT is a good opportunity to prioritize time together *because* of the busyness in families' lives.

**Lack of a stable/permanent caregiver** - To include youth who did not have a consistent caregiver or caregiver they felt safe attending with, we made sure to have an expansive definition of supportive adult, inviting youth to participate with any supportive adult in their life (parent, guardian, extended family member, coach, neighbor, close family friend, teacher, etc.) and designed our program and curriculum to reflect the diversity of families that may be present in the space.

**Discomfort with sexuality** - Stigma surrounding sexuality and conversations between adults and young people about sexuality often came up during recruitment conversations. We actively listened and validated concerns around discomfort from both adults and youth and informed participants that they have full autonomy to decide what they want and don't want to do during the programs, and reiterated that families won't be having conversations about sexuality during the program.

**Concern about the values of the program** - Adults were concerned the program would have a "top-down" imposition of values, including how parenting "should" be done. During conversations with adults, and in our recruitment materials, we emphasized that our goal is to help parents figure out their own values and communicate those values to their young people.

**Mistrust of facilitating organization** - Some community members didn't share the same values as us, as Planned Parenthood, or distrust Planned Parenthood due to current or historical mistreatment of them or their community. In these instances, actively listening and validating their concerns was important. Building authentic reciprocal relationships that demonstrated trustworthiness and working with community champions who were trusted and vouched for us also helped build relationships with new community members.

**Belief that "we already do that."** - Some families felt they had a good handle on sexuality conversations, and therefore had nothing to gain from LiFT. When this arose, we celebrated the connection that was already happening, and shared more about how LiFT could provide an opportunity for continued practice and community building.



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# recruiting

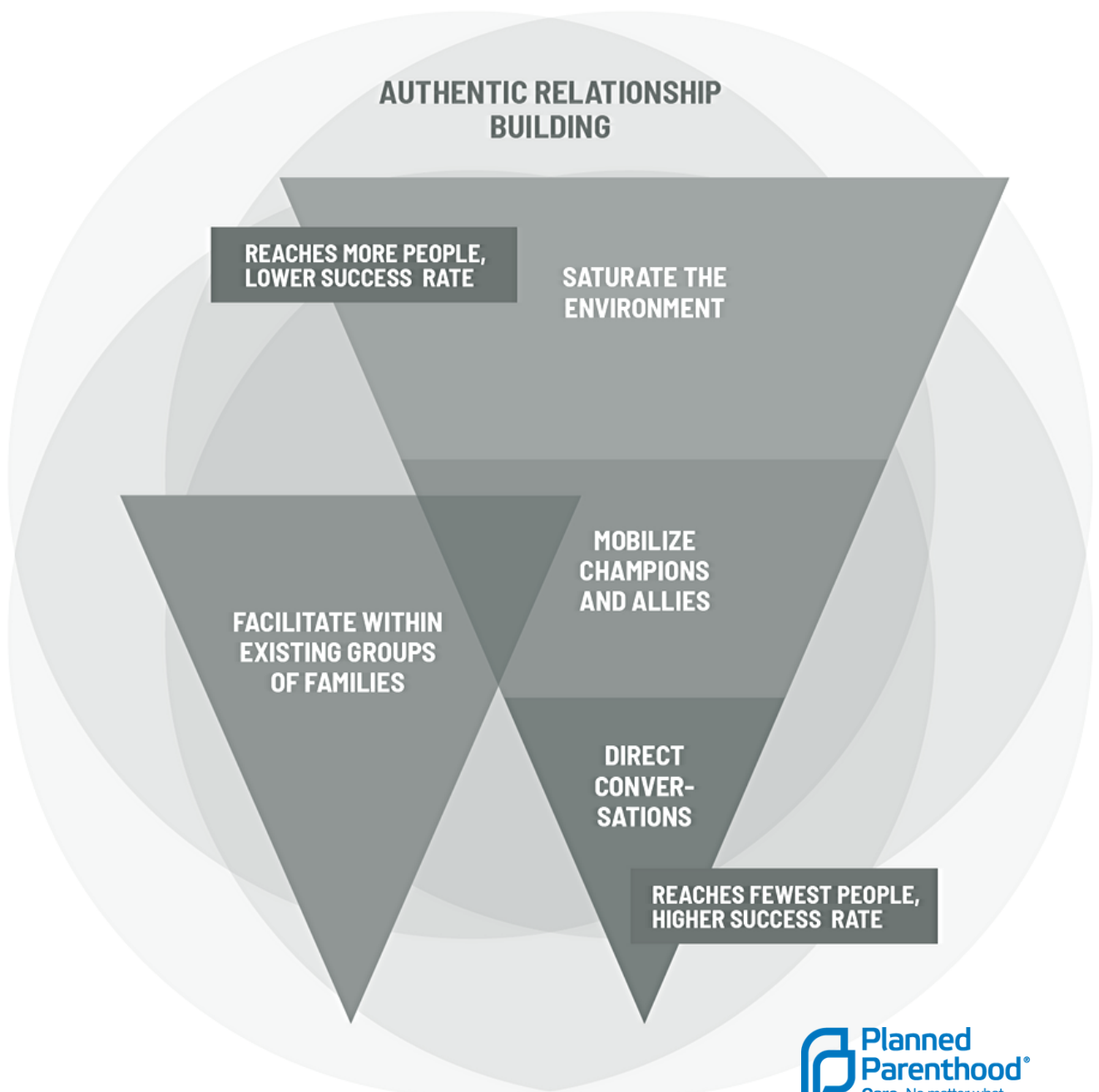
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## Creating a Tailored Recruitment Strategy

In the beginning of LiFT, some educators felt like they were "swimming" in recruitment - constantly trying all sorts of ideas but feeling like they weren't being successful. We developed the Recruitment Pyramid to provide some structure to educator's efforts.

At all recruitment activities, authentic relationship building is that foundation that reinforces and strengthens recruitment.



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# recruiting

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## Saturate the Environment

The first level of the recruitment pyramid included activities to ensure that LiFT was generally known by all community members - even those who may not be our direct audience. The more familiar communities were with LiFT, the more likely they were to listen when they heard someone talking about LiFT. Saturation made it more likely that potential participants responded to the strategies on the lower levels of the pyramid - it's a primer. Saturation was important, but on its own led to few participants ultimately joining the program.

Examples included: radio announcements, social media campaigns, posting flyers, announcements on school intercoms, and blurbs in newspapers.

## Mobilize Champions and Allies

Finding a community champion and a great partner who put the "stamp of approval" on LiFT was one of the best recruitment strategies that led to participants joining LiFT.

Who were the strongest champions?

- Previous LiFT participants
- Principals
- Counselors
- Teachers
- Religious leaders
- Direct service providers
- Medical providers
- Business leaders
- Coaches
- Community or cultural leaders or elders

What were the characteristics of champions?

- Involved
- Passionate
- Trusted
- Respected
- Connected
- Enthusiastic
- Believed in the importance of family communication

We engaged and supported champions by:

- Building long-term relationships and trust.
- Ensuring reciprocal partnerships - participating in, volunteering with, and uplifting the work they were doing.
- Meeting with them in person for face-to-face time.
- Giving them printed and/or electronic information about LiFT.
- Making a specific request & giving them a time frame.
- Leaving some swag or incentivizing them with gift cards, coffee, or other goodies.
- Following up to ask how their outreach went and providing additional support or tools.
- Sending a thank-you note and sharing an outcome of their support.



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## Direct Conversations

Sharing our passion, stories, and knowledge of LiFT was another very successful strategy to get people in the door. Asking questions and getting to know those we were talking with was an important part of engaging potential participants, as were making a pitch targeted directly at their experiences and family needs and continuing to build authentic relationships.

Educators set up an engaging table, hosted a lunch-time pizza party, and talked with larger groups to share pictures, treats, and lots of great stories about how LiFT could support their family and the larger community. One last important lesson learned: remember to collect contact information from anyone who shows any interest so you can continue the conversation later.

Locations for direct conversations included: Back to school or parent-teacher conferences, faith-based institutional gatherings, sporting events and youth sports teams, community fairs, mini-presentations (such as a short program activity or game) in classrooms, community hubs, or cultural events.

## Facilitate within existing groups of families

Rather than recruiting individual families, working with organizations or partners that support families or supportive adults that are already meeting consistently is a great way to bring LiFT to a community. This allows the opportunity to facilitate a program directly with them as opposed to recruiting a large group of participants from the broader community. This is one of the most efficient ways to recruit and it's important to keep equity in mind, as these groups may or may not include or exclude certain members of the community.

Examples included: faith-based institutions, support groups for families, families involved in extracurricular activities and team sports, community-based or cultural organizations, LGBTQ support centers, and scout troops.

## The Sign-Up List & Follow-Up

It was very important to stay in touch with those participants who expressed interest in joining LiFT. Educators followed up with interested participants after the initial contact and, as the program got closer, through phone, text, and email. A few tips:

- Create a contact list of anyone who shows interest in joining, making sure to include multiple ways to get in touch with them.
- Follow-up 2-3 times through phone calls, text, or email, plus a final text, call or email the day before the workshop.
- Gauge their level of commitment, set the expectation that they will be there, and preempt barriers by using some of the following prompts:
  - "I know that folks are busy! How can I help you be able to come?"
  - "We will be ordering lunch for everyone. What food requests/dietary needs do you have?"
  - "Most folks ask us to text/email/call a few days before with a reminder. What type of reminder do you want from me?"
  - "Text/call/email me back with your favorite candy and a Y/N to confirm that you'll be there!"



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The approach to recruitment detailed above created a program that has been embraced by many communities and participants who have previously closed their doors to sex ed programs. This model helped to train new facilitators, and ease recruitment frustration from veteran educators, and ultimately led to successful recruitment of over 900 families in rural communities. Although recruiting for LiFT has been challenging, our determination to do this work has strengthened after seeing the power that programs for families can have on the future of communication and connection.

We are excited to partner with you to bring LiFT to your community, and continue the conversation on how to support the recruitment of families and supportive adults into these important programs.

## For More Information

On these recruitment strategies or the LiFT program, please visit [www.plannedparenthood.org/planned-parenthood-great-northwest-hawaiian-islands/education/linking-families-and-teens](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/planned-parenthood-great-northwest-hawaiian-islands/education/linking-families-and-teens) or contact: [meagan.niebler@ppgnhi.org](mailto:meagan.niebler@ppgnhi.org)



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[1] Lezin, N. R. (2004). Parent-Child Connectedness: Implementations for Research, Interventions, and Positive Impacts on Adolescent Health. ETR Associates.

[2] Steiner, R.J., Sheremenko, G., Lesesne, C., Dittus, P.J., Sieving, R.E., et al. (2019). Adolescent connectedness and adult health outcomes. *Pediatrics*, 44 (1).

[3] Huberman, B. & Alford, S. (2005). Are You an Askable Parent? Retrieved from Advocates for Youth: <https://advocatesforyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/storage//advfy/documents/askable.pdf>

[4] ARB was developed by Grace Caligtan, Linda Guijosa, with additional credit to Faster than 20 (fasterthan20.com) and Dr. Sara Flowers.



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