

Educational Theatre Program: Promoting Health

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Educational Theatre Program Mission:

“Through arts and education, engage and inspire individuals and communities to make healthy choices.”

You know many of your young patients and families are overweight. Yet, how effective are your 15-minute sessions with each family? How do you overcome the electronic buzz, the marketing messages, the cultural teases, and the whispers of your patients’ peers to get them to eat and live well?

Kaiser Permanente (KP) has found a unique, health promotion strategy that complements the clinical messaging targeted to young people: the Educational Theatre Program (ETP). This program engages children in interactive productions to help them think about the choices they make that affect their health.

During ETP performances, audiences watch schoolmates or professional actors act out scenes about tough topics many of these children face every day, including poor self-esteem, obesity, diabetes, sexually transmitted diseases, drug abuse, suicide, bullying, and others.

Sometimes, the actors stop the action and ask the audience how they would handle a situation. Hands shoot up. The children’s honest responses are astounding. (See sidebar: What They Say About ETP.)

Begun in 1985, the award-winning ETP uses theatre to address critical issues children and families face today. Each production *shows* rather than *preaches*, through kinesthetic, aural, peer-to-peer learning, and lively interactive “talkback” opportunities during or after some performances. Scripts are informed by medical, educational, and theatre professionals; community members; parents; and—most important—the children themselves. In addition, each production is intentionally and intensively based on *The 40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents*¹ from the Search Institute (Minneapolis, MN), which focuses on “concrete, common sense, positive experiences and qualities essential to raising successful young people.”

In 2006, KP’s eight regions invested almost \$10.3 million in more than 2500 performances at 1883 schools to reach 539,000 children and 70,000 adults, including parents, teachers, principals, school counselors, and nurses. Through extensive media coverage, ETP also impacts communities. It is one of the largest children’s educational theatre programs in the US.

The regional ETPs interact regularly, sharing research, scripts, set designs, talkback approaches, teacher study guides, and evaluation models. Each region creates or adapts scripts to address local health issues. Most regions operate in-house troupes. The Northwest region is unique in that it has partnered with a professional company, Oregon Children’s Theatre, to deliver engaging, professional-quality shows, from script development and casting through evaluation. Some regions, such as Colorado and Northern California, use theatre as the focal point of broader health-intervention campaigns, which include meal programs, parenting classes, etc.

Why has KP made such a large investment in theatre? According to Phil Wu, MD, a KP Pediatrician who serves on the Northwest Region’s ETP advisory team and co-



Under the astute guidance of the janitor, “Rudy,” the “What Would You Do?” cast is eager to make choices that lead to healthier and happier lives.



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What They Say About ETP

- “I learned that you shouldn’t tease people.” Elementary school student
- “If friends tell you to do something bad, maybe don’t be friends with them.” Elementary school student
- “It made me think about playing more sports and being active, because I’m lazy.” Middle school student
- “I think it was fun to show kids how to make good choices in a musical because talking to them would be boring.” Middle school student
- “Watching *IF* made me think about how I should talk to people about my problems and how I feel. And try to listen and help them with their problems and feelings.” Middle school student
- “This is probably the best assembly I’ve ever seen for elementary students.” Elementary school counselor
- “Live performance really drives these messages home.” Fifth-grade teacher
- “We get a lot of shows that try to teach our students about these issues. This was nicely nuanced, in a context the kids can understand.” Elementary school principal
- “This play may have had more of an impact on me than the kids.” Middle school mother
- “When I grew up, kids were experience-rich and information-poor. Today, kids are experience-poor and information-rich. They’re aware of these issues, but we’re afraid of them talking about them because we’re afraid of the conversation.” Middle school principal

authored this article, “We’ve discovered that we must supplement traditional clinical approaches with other health intervention tools. [Theatre] is an entirely different way for us to communicate with our community about what they can do to effect change. It’s *motivational* instead of *prescriptive*. The latter approach never worked, and certainly doesn’t now. You don’t change behavior by telling people they *should* do something.”

Can we say that ETP is achieving its mission of inspiring children to make informed decisions about their health? Judging by overwhelmingly positive pre- and post surveys and anecdotal responses from parents, teachers, students, and KP staff, the answer is a resounding “yes!” After seeing an ETP production, students have told us they’ve decided to be nicer to people who are “different,” or to help friends with eating disorders and depression. Some have written that they’ve decided not to commit suicide. One sixth-grader



Cast members from Mt Solo Middle School’s production of *IF* sing “Through the Day,” an original song about kids’ hurried lives.

who starred in our original musical *IF* exclaimed, “I used to be a nobody. Now, I’m somebody. And now, I know I want to be an actor.” An eighth-grader at another school, who was undergoing chemotherapy for brain cancer, decided to try out for *IF* and drew in his “too-cool” friends to perform. Now, that’s a healthy leader!

As Dr Wu says, “This isn’t one of those programs where you expect to have a dramatic shift in behavior. Instead, we have planted a seed in a part of the brain that, in children this age, still is dormant. To change behavior, it’s important to give children brief and powerful messages several times and consistently. By following up with other activities and linking with other organizations that have a similar goal and messages, we really do have an impact.”

The national ETP also has hired Russell Granet, founder of Arts Education Resource, a consulting firm specializing in arts assessment, to structure a formal evaluation process. (See sidebar: Assessing ETP’s Effectiveness.)

We’re learning every day about theatre’s efficacy as a health-promotion tool. This is experiential learning—kinetic, engaged and real. It’s a valuable investment in children’s lives ... and we encourage communities and other health care organizations to consider adopting similar programs. For more information on programs in your area, visit our Web site: <http://xnet.kp.org/etp/> or see the sidebar: ETP Regional Office and Contacts. ❖

Assessing ETP’s Effectiveness

Is ETP achieving its mission? Are we helping children live healthier lives?

ETP leaders are gathering feedback and pre- and postproduction evaluations.

We’re also consulting with Russell Granet, founder of Arts Education Resource, a consulting firm specializing in arts assessment. We’re implementing his main message—“value what you assess and assess what you value” to help quantify the qualitative ETP experience. He advises us that, “We must be clear that statistics show that change is slow to happen. It’s unrealistic to assume that one 40-minute show will transform lives.” However, he adds that, “Educational theatre is engaging. If you tell me, I’ll forget; if you show me, I’ll remember; if you involve me, I’ll understand. The more we feel and do, the more we’ll retain, because educational theatre is in your body. It’s a multiple-intelligence approach, as posited by Howard Gardner, PhD, author of *Frames of Mind*.”

Glenna Kelly, Community Programs Manager for Colorado ETP, agrees with Granet. “In Colorado, our ETP Community Advisory Board tells us that theatre hits learning modalities (eg, repetition, rhythm, visualization and physical movement) that help plant the seeds Dr Wu talks about. In addition, focusing on what’s ‘right’ instead of what’s ‘wrong’ in young people can support positive, healthy development. Strength-based programming that develops critical thinking and social skills can provide young people with tools to help them avoid risk factors of all kinds. As the research done by the Search Institute on the ‘40 Developmental Assets’ indicates, the more strengths a young person has, the less likely they are to participate in risky behavior.”

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“The Futures Song” from *IF* shows kids they create the life they want—through decisions they make every day.