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Families & Learning

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What is Social Marketing?

The term social marketing was first used in 1971 when marketing techniques were applied to solving community health problems. Like its commercial counterpart, social marketing involves targeting a particular consumer group, asking what can be done to make the product attractive, and factoring in what the target audience might have to give up in order to take advantage of the opportunity the social marketer is promoting. But an important difference between the two approaches is that social marketing aims to make people more accepting of a social practice—like adopting a healthier lifestyle—and usually targets groups that are challenging to reach and less likely to change.

How is Social Marketing Relevant to Family Learning?

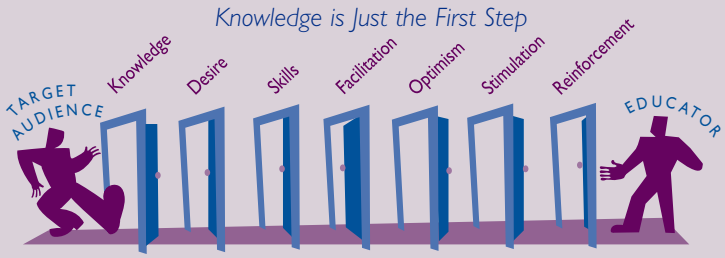
Educators know that family involvement helps children do well in school. The challenge is to help parents recognize that what they do at home to help their children in school makes a crucial difference.

Since the goal is to create avenues of meaningful family participation, educators need to ask parents about their needs and desires and respond accordingly, rather than to convey information from the top down based on the professionals' own assumptions. This "social marketing" approach seeks to influence parental behaviors to benefit their children, their families and the larger society. It's not about getting families to *know* more, it's about encouraging families to actually *do* more - in this case, more family learning activities.

But marketing the concept of family learning faces the same challenge as commercial product marketing - it must answer the question "What's in it for me?" or, in this case, "How will it benefit my child's education?" As social marketers, educators have to answer these questions, to connect families with resources, and to promote the idea that the whole community has a stake in family learning.

7 Steps to Social Change

Knowledge is Just the First Step



Les Robinson, a consultant for Social Change Media, looks at how behaviors change. He says we can't assume we have the "true knowledge" and that if we just inject our knowledge into the audience, they will start behaving correctly.

Rather, the process of behavior change is really clearing away obstacles and helping to "open the doors" of change for people. The educator as social marketer has the "humble role of a door opener, rather than a source of ultimate truth." As social marketers, Les says, we must look beyond "awareness communication" and actually help people visualize new futures.

Social Change Media at: http://media.socialchange.net.au/

Key Concepts in Social Marketing

Social marketing provides us with tools to increase awareness of the importance of a shared responsibility for literacy improvement.

- **Consumer Orientation:** Social marketing is based on the beliefs, attitudes, values, and practices of the target audience.
- **Audience Segmentation:** The target population is segmented into subgroups that receive messages tailored to their shared needs and interests.
- **Channel Analysis:** Social marketing considers optimum communication methods - where, when and to whom is the audience most likely to respond?
- **Strategy:** Based on program objectives and knowledge of the consumer, specific activities are used to reach the target audience.
- **Process Tracking:** Feedback mechanisms are used to determine if the program was implemented as planned, or if it needs to be redirected, refined or revised.

The goal of a social marketing campaign is to improve the quality of life of a targeted population using consumer-driven communication strategies to influence positive behavior change. For an example of social marketing in action, see the Stratford story on other side.

A Social Marketing Approach to Family Learning

An ongoing goal of the State Department of Education (SDE) is finding the best ways to help educators and parents harness the power of the home environment to support learning. Many families report they don't have enough information about supporting their children's learning at home; however, educators feel that they give out information all the time. This communication gap warranted further study and response from a social marketing point of view. The SDE, in partnership with the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund and Connecticut Voices for Children, conducted social marketing research to find strategies to bridge the school-home gap. The study employed surveys to determine the most effective "messages" and "messengers" for communicating with families, and to better understand the perceptions of families and professionals that impact message delivery.

The Research Revealed...

The study revealed that school is only one key leverage point in reaching families that are difficult to engage. Parents perceive that early childhood educators, librarians, and faith leaders are also important messengers. Families said they prefer the term "family learning" to "family literacy." The research also found that effective messages convey the idea that family learning makes families stronger, allows parents to spend quality time with their children, helps students do better in school, and is fun!

The Family Learning Pilot Project

The goal of the implementation phase was to learn how to create family learning communities. Stratford and Meriden were chosen as pilot communities to test strategies for increasing family involvement. The pilot goals included:

- Improving professional - family communication.
- Engaging community "messengers" about the importance of family learning.
- Training community providers in parent engagement and family learning.
- Increasing family learning practices through planned outreach to families.

Stratford's Story

Stratford was eager to participate in the Family Learning pilot program because their School Readiness Council had already identified family literacy as a town priority. The Stratford pilot project was led by the Stratford School Readiness and Child Care Advisory Council, the Stratford Library Association, and the office of the Assistant Superintendent of Schools. These leaders recruited the "trusted messengers" identified by the study—classroom teachers, librarians, early care providers, and local religious leaders. Along with other educators and community members, they attended the training and participated in the project.

Here's What Stratford Did

Strategies were developed to get the message out about family learning. Schools held family learning nights and potluck suppers to promote the idea that everyday activities are a great way for children to learn. The Recreation Department printed the family learning message on 1,500 tee shirts distributed to their summer campers. The Rotary Club and Clergy Association invited family learning trainees to tell them more about the project so they could help spread the word. The Stratford Library and Parents' Place incorporated family learning messages into their activities with families. Stratford messengers disseminated 5,400 Family Learning Brochures, with a response card for a Family Learning Kit of community resources and a free children's book. More than 1,200 Stratford families requested the age-appropriate family learning kits.

And the Results?

The Family Learning Pilots made a great start. Evaluations showed that 100% of the "messengers" surveyed said the project had a positive influence on them and 90% said they had greater respect for family learning. Nearly all parents who were contacted said they found the family learning message important (96%) and the family learning brochure and kits useful (91%). More than two-thirds of parents reported engaging in more family learning activities with their children as a result.

For more information and ideas about family literacy go to www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/Family/Literacy.