

The RealCare Baby® Program

Evidence of Efficacy

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A Realityworks White Paper

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Executive Summary

Facing cutbacks in local and state funding, a large and growing number of U.S. organizations are looking to federal grants to help underwrite a variety of program additions and enhancements.

One of the most successful educational investments – used by nearly 8,000 districts and 4,200 health and service organizations nationwide – is the RealCare Program developed by Realityworks.

Evidence collected over the years indicates that the program offers a highly effective approach to preventing teenage pregnancies and teaching parenting skills. For decision-makers who are considering the RealCare Program, the obvious question is: Does it meet the stringent evidence-based requirements tied to federal funding? The answer is “yes,” and through detailed research study findings, the answer will be supported in this paper.**

Based on the aggregate research findings, the author affirms that the RealCare Program can play a central role in helping schools and communities reduce teenage pregnancies while teaching valuable parenting skills for use later in life. Moreover, the research findings present a strong case for the program’s evidence-based foundation, paving the way for the successful procurement of federal grants and other funding sources.

** For information regarding specific research studies and access to complete research results, see our website at www.realityworks.com.

The Program

Since it was introduced by Realityworks in 1995, the RealCare Program has become a staple in teen pregnancy prevention and parenting programs around the world. The popularity of the RealCare Program may be traced to the uniquely realistic, interactive learning experience it offers.

The Baby's appearance and behaviors replicate those of a real infant. In fact, his or her care needs are based on the actual experiences of parents who kept a diary of the feeding, diapering, rocking, burping, and other care-giving provided to their children. Participants become sole caretakers of RealCare Babies around the clock, typically over a span of several days.

Throughout the duration of a simulation, an internal computer records essential data about student performance and summarizes the data in a simple assessment of care provided to the simulator. This assessment data is used by the instructor and participant alike to measure performance and can be used to reflect on the learning experience.

A set of 3 curricula, developed with input from experts in parenting, health, and education from across the country, explore the physical, emotional, social, and financial consequences of becoming pregnant and dealing with parenthood.

Evidence-Based Criteria

Many federal grant programs require educational programs to be “evidence based.” The question is, does the RealCare Program meet the threshold for “evidence based”? In compiling the research studies used for analysis, the author sought a broad range of characteristics related to study participants, geographic location, types of research, how the results were measured, and other important variables.

How does one determine whether a program is evidence based?

Faced with a multitude of options, but constrained by funding limitations, organizations must make difficult purchasing decisions. This dilemma is magnified when the desired funding is a federal grant. The potential investment must exemplify evidence-based principles supported by research findings.

For example, one source, The United States Department of Education Grant Request for Proposal form, suggests asking the following four self-assessment questions when developing evidence-based objectives to include in a grant proposal and plan:

1. Is the activity, program, or service based on a well-defined theory or model?
2. Is there sound evidence to show that the activity, curriculum, program, or service contributed to a desired outcome?

¹ The original version of the RealCare® Baby Program was called “Baby Think It Over.”

² More detailed information about the RealCare® Baby Program is available at www.realityworks.com/infantsimulations/realcarebaby.asp

³ Alternately known as “scientifically based,” “science based,” or “research based.”

3. Given the community's risk and protective factors, can the activity, curriculum, program, or service be replicated with fidelity?
4. Is the program age, gender, and culturally appropriate for the selected population?

Another source, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), further recommends that the application narrative contain sufficient information and data to support the effectiveness of the program or intervention. Citations may include, but are not limited to, statistical analyses or professional publications.

Lastly, the nonprofit research center, Child Trends, as well as other health-related agencies, offers this guideline for evaluating evidence-based programs: that they be reported in peer-reviewed journals or documented by other reliable sources. Besides showing positive effects on the primary targeted group, the consensus of informed experts should satisfy all of these requirements for an intervention:

- That it is based on a theory of change which is documented in a clearly logical or conceptual model
- That it is similar in content to interventions appearing in registries and/or peer-reviewed literature
- That its effective implementation is supported by documentation, multiple times, in a manner showing a consistent pattern of credible and positive effects
- That it is reviewed and deemed appropriate by a panel of informed experts

The Research

Over a span of several years a variety of experimental and quasi-experimental design studies have been conducted concerning the RealCare® Program, including a pretest/posttest/follow-up survey for two criterion measures evaluating the attitudes and cognitive performance of the treatment and comparison groups to determine change towards teen pregnancy and parenting. Treatment group and control group statistical analysis and comparisons were also conducted. A majority of these research results were published in peer-reviewed professional journals.

The studies, reviewed and available on our website, evaluated a number of elements related to teen pregnancy, the onset of sexual activity, parenting, and other topics. The research findings show that the RealCare® Program, in combination with a structured curriculum for teenage pregnancy prevention, has repeatedly proved its effectiveness and, over a period of years, has established strong evidence-based attributes.

Conclusions

For more and more organizations, federal grants and other funding sources are becoming an important ingredient in the purchase of investments such as the RealCare Program.

Before proceeding down the grant procurement pathway, however, decision makers must ascertain 1) whether the program is effective and will equip them to achieve their intended objectives; and 2) whether the program is evidence-based, one of the key eligibility requirements for a federal grant.

Reviewing the research studies in their entirety, one can conclude that the RealCare Program meets both criteria.

This conclusion is supported by specific key findings replicated through multiple research studies. Specifically, participants were more likely than non-participants to:

- Postpone sexual relations and parenthood
- Use birth control or other means to prevent pregnancy
- Appreciate the demands, time commitment, and costs associated with having a child
- Understand that raising a child affects quality of life and makes it difficult to continue an education
- Communicate with their parents about parenting and sexuality issues

An evaluation of the RealCare Program would not be complete without considering other supporting evidence. The sheer number of educators – more than 35,000 – who are active RealCare users speaks volumes about the effectiveness of the program. In addition, more than 134,000 RealCare Babies are currently used in over 8,000 U.S. school districts and over 4,000 health and service organizations; 34,000 additional Babies are used in 46 other countries. From customer organizations, Realityworks has received a wealth of anecdotal testimony to support the program.

This successful program has caught the attention of several venerable institutions, including the HORIZON Solutions Site (www.solutions-site.org), a collaboration of the United Nations Environment Program, the United Nations Development Program, the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), HORIZON’s colleagues at Harvard University and Yale University, and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada. The RealCare Program is listed in the site’s best practices documentation.

The RealCare Program has also been approved by the following organizations for adoption or endorsement as educational resources:

- Teenwise (formerly known as the Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting, or MOAPPP) has reviewed and chosen the Healthy Choices curriculum (from the RealCare® Program) as a ‘recommended resource’
- Idaho State Department of Education (8/1/09 – 12/31/15)
- Alabama Department of Education (6/1/10 – 5/31/16)
- Utah State Office of Education (7/1/09 – 6/30/14)

Overall, researchers have concluded that the use of the Realityworks infant simulator with a comprehensive curriculum has an immediate and lasting impact on aspirations of participants to become parents, the effects of teen pregnancy, the onset of sexual relations, attitudes towards contraceptive usage and postponing pregnancy, and has opened discussions with parents about sex and becoming a parent.

Statistically significant gains were found on the total score and the impact of having a baby on academics, social life, and other family members; emotional risks; understanding and handling an infant's crying; and apprehension of the amount of responsibility involved in infant care.

Both the results of the data analyses and the adolescents' own evaluation confirm the effectiveness of the RealCare Program intervention in changing perceptions regarding the time and effort involved in caring for an infant and in recognizing the significant effect having a baby has on all major aspects of one's life.

About the Author

Min Qi Wang, Ph.D., FAAHB, is a tenured professor in the Department of Public and Community Health at the University of Maryland, College Park, MD. Dr. Wang has been the recipient of more than 70 funded research grants totaling more than \$9.7 million during his career at the University of Maryland, University of Alabama, and Penn State University. Dr. Wang is an accomplished author and speaker on a national level. He has published nearly 200 articles in peer-reviewed journals and has presented at hundreds of conferences around the country. Dr. Wang holds affiliations with the American Association of Public Health, the American Academy of Health Behavior, and the American Statistical Association.

About Realityworks

Realityworks, Inc. is the leader in experiential learning technology and creator of the world's first computerized infant simulators, used around the world to teach life skills and prevent adolescent pregnancy. The company was founded in 1994 with a goal of providing students with realistic learning experiences. Realityworks products combine technology with hands-on simulations to create unforgettable learning experiences for educators and students alike. For more information about the company or the RealCare Program, visit www.realityworks.com. Inquiries may be directed to 800.830.1416 or information@realityworks.com.

