

TOGETHER FOR LIFE

School/Student Toolkit

for Community Coordinators

A pilot project to increase seat belt
use in Utah's rural communities



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TOGETHER FOR LIFE *School/Student*

Schools are often considered the hub of a community. Schools are tasked with helping students learn academically, but schools also play an important role in guiding youth to make healthy and safe choices and to avoid risky ones in their personal lives. Seat belt use is an important topic because motor vehicle crashes are a leading cause of death for young people ages 5 to 24.¹ Community coordinators need the help of school leaders to increase seat belt use among their staff and their students.

- In 2017, on average, 3 children were killed in traffic crashes every day in the United States.²
- According to the 2020 Utah Fatal Crash Summary, there were 276 traffic deaths in Utah and 65 of those deaths were children and teens aged 19 and younger.³
- Over the past 7 years, an estimated 411 people would have been saved had they been wearing a seat belt.³

The Together for Life Project tools developed for schools are designed to increase seat belt use among administrators, teachers, staff, and students in all grade levels using multiple strategies.

Being properly restrained in a seat belt is “one of the most effective measures a person can take to prevent injury and death in a crash.”⁴ Community coordinators can help grow protection and reduce harm associated with not using a seat belt by:

1. fostering dialogue with schools;
2. promoting healthy norms and correcting misperceptions; and
3. promoting prosocial traffic safety behaviors.

1. Fostering Dialogue with Schools

A collaborative relationship is essential to any successful partnership and is often the starting point for efforts to engage school leaders. Community coordinators who focus on building relationships and engaging in meaningful dialogue with school administrators, teachers, and staff build trusting relationships. This is one of the most essential elements to closing gaps in perceptions and ultimately in changing beliefs and behaviors in Utah. To move communication efforts with school leaders forward in a positive and collaborative way, attention to building relationships is critical.

Community coordinators may be asking, “Where do we start?” “How do we engage in conversations that foster relationships?” Approaching conversations collaboratively is a starting point. A fundamental approach of Motivational Interviewing, developed by Miller and Rollnick (2002), is to develop an atmosphere that is “conducive rather than coercive to change” (p. 35). More specifically, entering into conversations without confrontation or preconceived judgment is critical, as is respecting the opinions and perspectives of others. It is important to create an environment that is accepting and allows for two-way conversation. Developing this skill through practice is important.

Entering into a conversation with an “I know what is best, and you should do what I say” style is counterproductive to developing rapport and is likely to backfire in efforts to build relationships and foster dialogue. Avoid an authoritative approach when possible, and seek instead to gain a better understanding of the other person’s beliefs, preferences, and attitudes.⁵ There is much to learn from one another, and one strategy that can foster relationship building is to approach a conversation with this goal in mind.

Getting a Meeting

It can be intimidating to ask for a meeting with school leaders, as well as start a conversation about the importance of focusing on efforts to increase seat belt use among staff and students. It is important to articulate how efforts to increase seat belt use behaviors are aligned with the school's goals and initiatives so the community coordinators can connect their request for a meeting with what is important to the school. The Utah School Health Education Standards discuss safety including seat belts.

Once You Have a Meeting

Creating opportunities for dialogue is an essential tool to engage school leaders. Conversations can foster engagement and collaboration, create interest, and encourage action. Brown, Isaacs, Vogt, and Margulies (2002) suggest that asking powerful questions that promote dialogue enforces the notion that people “already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges” (p. 3). From this perspective, when planning a meeting with school leaders, it is important to frame your questions to elicit dialogue and foster conversation. “Well-created questions attract energy and focus our attention on what really counts” (p. 4).⁶

Asking open-ended questions is a specific strategy to start a conversation that encourages exploration and ongoing dialogue.⁵ The following are some open-ended conversation examples to illustrate ways community coordinators might approach school leaders in their community.

Open-Ended Conversation Samples

1. Tell me what you see as the school's role in increasing seat belt use?
Among students? Among staff? Among their families?
2. In what ways could the school influence seat belt use? Among students?
Among staff? Among their families?
3. How can we assist you in your efforts to improve seat belt use among youth in the school?

Asking open-ended questions that establish an atmosphere of trust and respect helps create an environment that fosters meaningful interactions with school administrators and teachers. Through open-ended questions, community coordinators are able to begin to understand administrators' and teachers' perceptions, ideas, and frustrations. Avoid questions that have yes or no answers. Below are examples of conversation starters to avoid.

Conversation Starters to Avoid

1. Do you care about seat belt use among youth?
2. Do you think seat belt use in our community is important?
3. Are you willing to support the prevention efforts happening in our community to increase seat belt use?

Remember, one of the most essential components to change beliefs and behaviors is to develop trusting relationships. To propel the efforts with school leaders forward, collaborative relationships must be built and nurtured.

2. Promoting Healthy Norms and Correcting Misperceptions

Community coordinators are in a position to help school administrators, teachers, staff, and students accurately understand the current attitudes and beliefs about seat belt use in their communities because they have data which shows these attitudes and beliefs. Growing protective norms about seat belt use can reduce risk of injury or death; guide conversations among families, within schools, and the community; and promote seat belt use. Attitudes and beliefs are important because they influence behavior. Utah adults⁷ and students⁸ share protective beliefs and attitudes about always wearing a seat belt.

While the norms regarding seat belt use in Utah are strong, they can always be strengthened. Misperceptions that people may have about others' beliefs and behaviors can also be corrected. Key findings revealed misperceptions among most Utah adults⁷ and students⁸ about others always wearing a seat belt. These misperceptions may increase the likelihood of not wearing a seat belt.

Tips on Advocating for Student Surveys

Having accurate information related to current actual and perceived norms is critical to successful social norms interventions. Student surveys are an effective way to measure actual and perceived norms regarding a variety of health and safety issues affecting youth. However, many federal, state, and community initiatives place tremendous demands on schools and compete for time with students. This puts considerable stress on school officials to prioritize how students' time is allocated. As one more "outsider" asking for access to students, community coordinators may be more successful at building lasting, meaningful relationships with school leaders if they acknowledge these pressures.

The following are tips for advocating for student surveys. First, nothing replaces a trusting relationship. One component of building trust is to recognize shared values. It is critical to establish a shared understanding of the fundamental reasons community coordinators and school leaders do their work: to improve the well-being of youth. This shared value will help build trust, and community coordinators are encouraged to begin the discussion here.

Specific Tips

1. First, meet with school leaders and briefly share what your organization does. Then ask how the issues your organization is addressing affect students in their school. Seek to assist as a solution to the problems. Ask how your group can be of service to them. If school leaders are hard to reach, try other connections within the school. Any connection within the school is a starting point! Do not make your first contact with school leaders about asking to conduct a survey.

2. Plan to educate school leaders regarding health related issues before addressing surveys. Statewide or national surveys can provide initial data to start the conversation. Often school leaders are not well informed about health related issues because they receive limited information. Therefore, their perceptions may be skewed.
3. Bring mock-ups or examples of media that can be created based on the results of the survey. Showing media examples and using a positive frame can help ease anxieties about how the data will be used. Often school leaders become excited about sharing a positive message about their students.
4. If schools are uncomfortable releasing data, offer to hold it in confidence and seek their approval before releasing any information with the results. Over time, they may give you more freedom. The goal is to build trusting relationships, and it is important to recognize this takes time.
5. Inquire about the planning cycle for the school. School calendars are often established at the end of the preceding year or during the summer. The best time to discuss a potential survey is during planning season.
6. Before asking to have a new survey conducted, find out the schedule for testing and other surveys. Avoid asking for an additional survey within six weeks of other surveys or tests. Often, surveys can only be conducted every other year to avoid conflicts. This is better than never!
7. Avoid saying “we need to survey students because the grant says so.” This appears to remove the decision from the school leader and creates lack of trust. Instead, focus on why the community received the grant – the deep, underlying purpose: to improve the well-being of youth and the community.

8. Make survey implementation very easy for the school. Take on the burden of organizing materials or training staff on appropriate procedures. Some communities have utilized members of their coalition to proctor the surveys and provided the teachers an extra planning period. This can be a win-win solution for everyone.
9. Thank the teachers by providing a special food tray in the teacher's lounge or other appropriate acknowledgement when the survey is administered.
10. Offer to conduct an in-service with school leaders, and staff about the results of the survey as well as your prevention efforts and plans. Often the results of surveys are not widely distributed and therefore some may fail to see the benefits of actually conducting the surveys.

Interpreting Baseline Data

Once student surveys have been implemented, it is important to recognize that data are neither good nor bad but are “just data.” This is a critical perspective because leaders often get caught in political pressures to compare their school norms with those of other schools or standards. While such a comparison process has merit, it can also be detrimental to the development and acquisition of useful data. It is the responsibility of leaders to put these data into a positive, useful context to promote health, and to use data for telling “the story” about their school.

Data Focus on Concern and Hope

View data through a holistic lens that encompasses both concern and hope. Data can identify areas of concern as well as assets and strengths. It is essential to recognize the importance of honoring both sides of this continuum and present a comprehensive view of the community.

Questions to Foster Meaningful Dialogue⁹

Questions to Focus Collective Attention

- What opportunities are the data revealing?
- What do we still need to learn about this issue?
- What would someone who has a very different set of beliefs than you say about these data?

Questions to Reveal Deeper Insights

- What have you seen in the data that has had real meaning for you?
- What surprised you? What challenged you? What encouraged you?
- What needs clarification?
- What has been your major learning, insight, or discovery so far from these data?

Questions to Create Forward Movement

- What is possible here?
- What will it take to create change?
- What requires our immediate attention going forward?

Adapted from Brown, Isaacs, and Community, 2005

Validity of Self-Report Survey Data (Responding to: “But everyone lied on the survey...”)

Questioning the validity of survey data is often one of the first reactions encountered when sharing survey results. It is important first to recognize this response for what it may be: an immediate reaction to information challenging someone’s existing beliefs. If someone believes that “everyone really does X around here,” then sharing data indicating that “most people here do NOT do X” is often initially hard to accept. One way to avoid accepting the new information is to choose to consider it as invalid. For this reason, it is important to understand and convey that the science behind collecting data through self-reporting methods is valid and reliable.

The Science Behind Collecting Self-Report Data

Self-report data are a critical component of social science. Consequently, the validity of self-report data has been studied extensively and is supported by scientific research.

Researchers have identified two critical factors to examine when assessing the validity of self-report data: cognitive issues and situational issues.¹⁰ Cognitive issues address whether the respondents understand the question and whether they have the knowledge or memory to answer it accurately.¹⁰ Survey designers carefully test language used on surveys and make sure respondents understand the terms.¹⁰ In addition, the respondent's ability to recall information accurately is also tested.¹⁰

Situational issues include the influence of the setting of the survey (at school, at home, etc.).¹⁰ Certain questions may have a socially desirable response (which also may change based on the setting). For example, at home, youth may be reluctant to admit they have gotten drunk if they perceive their parents can access their responses. However, at school, they may exaggerate their drinking if they perceive their peers can access their responses. Furthermore, some answers may disclose inappropriate or unlawful acts, which could result in the fear of punishment.¹⁰ The research is clear that the "fear of reprisal" experienced by a respondent will influence the validity of the survey results.¹⁰ In summary, the setting and survey administration are important and typically accounted for in instructions to survey administrators. The best results occur when there is a strong sense of anonymity and little fear of reprisal.¹⁰

Ways to Respond to People Who Challenge Validity of Self-Report Data

While the public often questions self-report data when results are shared, the validity of self-report survey data is supported by extensive scientific research and statistical analysis. It is important to be prepared for this response and ready to explain the science behind the validity of such data.

It is important to acknowledge that people who challenge the validity of the survey may be struggling with accepting the results. It is better NOT to argue with them, as this may increase resistance and actually encourage them to hold on to their position. It is best to share the science behind the survey design and implementation, and allow them time to reflect. Below are some suggested ways to share the science and support the validity of the data:

- “Much of social science relies on self-reported information. Because of this, there has been extensive research regarding the validity of self-reported data. Researchers have found that self-reported data are accurate when individuals understand the questions and when there is a strong sense of anonymity and little fear of reprisal.”
- “These results are very similar to those found in other surveys as well as results gathered historically. This pattern of consistency supports the validity of the results.”
- “No survey is perfect, and there is always a certain margin of error. However, overall the results provide us with an accurate indication of what is occurring.”
- “Survey analysts use various techniques to identify students who are not taking the survey seriously. These surveys are removed from the sample and not included in the results.”

Brener et al., 2003, pp. 436-457

3. Promoting Prosocial Traffic Safety Behaviors

In addition to highlighting shared protective beliefs and behaviors, and highlighting gaps in perceptions, community coordinators can help school administrators, teachers, staff, and students engage in this issue by providing specific actions to increase seat belt use including promoting the importance of always wearing a seat belt and engaging others to always wear a seat belt.

Promote the Importance of Always Wearing a Seat Belt

Community coordinators can highlight the importance of ALWAYS wearing a seat belt and can draw attention to the discrepancies that exist between what people think they should do and what people actually do.

The goal is to create behavior change by highlighting gaps between what people are thinking and what people are doing. For example, community coordinators might pose the following questions for others to consider.

- If I believe it is important to protect myself by always wearing a seat belt, why don't I always wear a seat belt?
- If people who care about me want me to always wear a seat belt, why don't I always wear a seat belt?
- If I want people I care about to always wear a seat belt, why don't I always ask others to wear a seat belt?

The Utah Community Survey of Adults on Seat Belt Use Key Findings Report and the Utah Student Key Findings & Statistical Report can provide additional information for community coordinators.

Engaging Others to Always Wear a Seat Belt

Getting others to always wear a seat belt is an important action to increase seat belt use. The good news is that most adults⁷ and students⁸ in Utah wear seat belts. However, there are still some people who choose not to wear a seat belt. Traditional approaches to addressing this issue include education and enforcement of seat belt laws. However, another approach that can impact the behavior of the smaller group who chooses not to wear seat belts is to engage the larger group who do buckle up to speak up and get involved. Speaking up and getting involved in the safety of others is known as bystander engagement. Bystander engagement emphasizes the influence that other people have on behavior and highlights the importance of a shared responsibility. Bystander engagement has been studied in relation to a variety of situations including cyber bullying,¹¹ relationship violence,¹² and risky driving behaviors such as not wearing a seat belt.¹³ Encouraging people to speak up and get involved to prevent unsafe behaviors sends a message of caring about others. Safety is everyone's responsibility. Building the capacity to intervene and engage others to always wear a seat belt is an important action that can be promoted among administrators, teachers, staff, and students.

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Using Targeted Strategies

While strategies such as promoting the positive healthy norms that already exist in Utah, correcting misperceptions, promoting the importance of always wearing a seat belt, and engaging others to always wear a seat belt can be promoted across the “social ecology” of the school system (e.g., administrators, teachers, staff, and students), there are also some targeted strategies at the elementary school, middle school, high school, and district level that community coordinators can work with school leaders to implement to increase seat belt use. More detail about these targeted strategies can be found in the School Leader Booklet.

Conclusion

The shared values, behaviors, and attitudes about seat belt use among adults and students provide a strong foundation for increasing seat belt use in rural Utah.

The tools of the Together for Life Project build on the strengths and resources that already exist. Schools are important stakeholders that play a vital role in guiding youth to make healthy and safe choices.

Tools

1. Key Findings & Statistical Report

An overview of the beliefs and attitudes of students from questions added to SHARP Survey, 2021.

2. Activity Decision-Making Worksheet

A worksheet designed to examine the impact of an activity to increase protective behaviors of schools/students.

3. Press Release

Sample press release.

4. School Leader Booklet

The School Leader Booklet is to be given to school leaders and provides specific targeted strategies for elementary school students, middle school students, and high school students. Additionally, the School Leader Booklet provides facts, sample emails, and policy considerations that can be used to engage staff district-wide in dialogue about seat belt use.

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