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# **A BAI Draft White Paper Girls Power – “Chicas Con Fuerza” Program**

**Prepared for:  
Office on Women’s Health  
Female Youth: At-Risk Factors for  
Juvenile Delinquency and Gang  
Involvement**

## Introduction

Behavioral Assessment Inc. developed and implemented “Girls Power – Chicas Con Fuerza”, an HIV and delinquency and high-risk behavior prevention program for at-risk Latina youth.

The overarching goal was to prevent incidents of injury and violence and HIV risk among targeted at-risk Latina youth (11-14 years of age). To support this goal, there were several key objectives: increase their self-esteem to enhance their feelings of self-worth and confidence; increase their knowledge about women’s reproduction/health and sexually transmitted diseases; decrease incidents of delinquency; and increase their confidence and self-efficacy with approaching and fulfilling academic responsibilities.

The development of this program centered on building resilience among high-risk minority (Latina) adolescents by incorporating groups and activities that strengthen these young girls’ protective factors<sup>1</sup>. The program hosted after school workshops using culturally appropriate curriculums in self-esteem/recreational leadership and women reproduction/ health education. Other key groups included educational tutoring, anger management and coping skills, and goal setting. Below are the program objectives with the length of group times.

**Violence** The consequences of witnessing family violence or sexual abuse include physical and/or psychological trauma. The violence children see and hear has profound effects on their development in a number of domains. In the past two decades, Mexican American female aggression against their partners was reported as high as 85% for psychological aggression and 48% for physical aggression<sup>2</sup>. Physical abuse by a current partner is reported as high as 11% among Mexican American females<sup>3</sup>. Violence in dating relationships for females in high school is also prevalent, with 31.3% of females experiencing some form of physical violence.

**Substance Abuse/ and HIV.** Given the context of this environment come the alarming high rates of substance abuse and HIV/AIDS cases among Latinas. Current national research shows women and children of color at greatest risk of substance abuse and related HIV infection. The Center for Disease Control estimates that 120,000 to 160,000 women are living with HIV, and that number is rapidly increasing. The percentage of new cases involving women in Orange County with AIDS rose from 5% in 1990 to 11% in 2000, and 44% of Orange County new 2000 AIDS cases were Latino, which is shocking since Latinos accounted for only 31% of the population. Studies show the two most common ways women contract AIDS is through sex with men and intravenous drug use.

**Culture.** Research has demonstrated that Hispanic/Latino cultural beliefs about gender roles and the social norms of sexuality have created a power of inequalities that are linked to HIV risk and protective behaviors. For instance, Latino men who identify with traditional “machismo” may have strong resilience for HIV-STD infection because of their empowering beliefs of responsibility and protection towards their family; while

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<sup>1</sup> Protective factors for this program were viewed in the context of individual, peer, school, and community factors. The intent was to strengthen each of these factors in the youths’ lives such to protect them from making poor decisions and practicing risky behaviors.

<sup>2</sup> Sugihara & Warner, 2002

<sup>3</sup> Szasz, 2001

dangerous risks include: sexual intercourse with multiple partners<sup>4</sup>, unprotected sex<sup>5</sup>, and sexual coercion<sup>6</sup>. For Latinas, the traditional gender roles are expectations that women are to be pure and acquiesce to men's wishes<sup>7</sup> and not be confrontational with them<sup>8</sup>. The combination of these expectations results in perpetual and often deadly, sexual silence. These beliefs further place our young Latinas at risk for pregnancy and/or contract STD/HIV because they are not given accurate information about their sexuality from their adult caregivers.

In a study on attitudes and behavior about condom use with high school students, findings suggested that Latino students have lower condom use than African American or Caucasian students. Further, compared with other adolescent females, Latinas are least likely to use contraceptives and have the longest interval between onset of sex and first contraceptive use<sup>9</sup>.

### **Program's Challenges and Successes**

Our program implementation proceeded very well with each of the original project objectives being met. We were successful in our efforts to have strong **collaborative partnerships** and **community outreach**. For instance our relationship with school principals and school counselors at the 3 Intermediate Schools (Sierra, Spurgeon, and McFadden) allowed us to provide group activities on the school campuses right after school in a classroom, which was safe and convenient for the girl participants and their families. Thomas Serafin of the Santa Ana Police Department provided a presentation on self-defense and assertiveness training which empowered our youth to understand how the law can protect them in case of being attack by a perpetrator and various approaches to maintain their safety. We found that this presentation was a necessity as many of our youth live in areas that have high volume of violence and are at risk of being victimized. Another accomplishment was our partnership with Orange County's Planned Parenthood that provided Health Educators who facilitated four weeks of information on women's health. The Health Educators were creative, reliable and provided the information at an age appropriate level. Part of the success in this program was the collaboration we had these partnerships, which not only addressed the goals of the program but also increased their resources and linkages to the community.

Another success was the structure of the program groups and the design of the classrooms on the school campuses. We had four tables and each of the youth was assigned to a table with one college mentor or staff assigned to it. The purpose of this design was not only to keep order in the room but it also allowed the youth to establish a relationship with a college mentor and with their peers. The mentor was able to establish rapport and trust which enabled the youth to share within the group their thoughts and feelings regarding the events occurring in their personal lives and/or topics addressed during the program session.

Groups were designed to have a Check-in process and Check-out process followed by a Large Group discussion which was either a guest speaker's presentation or

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<sup>4</sup>Levy, Shafer, & Evans, 2005

<sup>5</sup>Marin, 2003; Jarama, Kennamer, Hendricks, & Bradford, 2005

<sup>6</sup>Caceres, Marin, & Hudes, 2000

<sup>7</sup>Peragallo, DeForge, Khoury, Rivero, & Talashek, 2002

<sup>8</sup>Nyamathi, Bennet, Leake, Lewis, & Flaskerud, 1993

<sup>9</sup>Brindis et al 2002

the Group Leader. After the Large Group discussion, a 10-minute break for snack time and transition to Small Group discussion. It was during the Small Group discussion where the mentor would ask open-ended questions and/or answer questions they may have had regarding the Large Group discussion in order to process and integrate the materials presented during the group. Also, looking at the developmental stage of the program participants it was essential to provide an opportunity for youth to get a sense of belonging and acceptance thus beginning to form their identity.

Through our collaboration with Sierra, Spurgeon, and McFadden Intermediate Schools, the Chicas Con Fuerza Program sessions were held three times a week right after school on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Each session has specifically addressed delinquency prevention and HIV prevention topics. Our last week of official weekly services was the week of August 17, 2009. Make up sessions were provided to ensure youth who missed program days could have the opportunity to complete the program curriculum as intended.

A graduation ceremony was held for the girls who completed the curriculum-based activities and for those who participated in the program. Twenty girls and their families participated in the graduation ceremony, which was held at the Orange County Bar Foundation on August 20, 2009 from 5:30p.m. – 8p.m. The families completed post-tests, food was served, and the girls received certificates of completion and participation. The remaining participants and their parents completed their post-tests by after the graduation ceremony.

Some of the challenges we had occurred were increasing the retention rate especially during the summer months. Due to school budget cuts no summer course were offered during the summer for intermediate schools in Santa Ana. A voluntary summer program was provided by “Think Together”, an after school program, from 8am to 12pm which was from the last week of June to the end of July. This provided a slight challenge but we were able to coordinate with the Coordinators of Think Together for each campus and with our partnership with Santa Ana School District. We were able to ensure our CHICAS participants were excused from this summer program activities, got permission to be on the school campus during summer months and changed our group time since the campus was closed after 12pm during these months.

Other barriers to services were the change of location of program sessions during the month of August. Our program sessions continued on until mid-August and since the school campuses were officially closed during this month, we had to have these program sessions at the OCBF office. Additionally, several of our supplemental and program participants that were in 8<sup>th</sup> grade going on to 9<sup>th</sup> grade had to attend summer school at their high school (summer school was still being offered for high school students only) therefore they could not attend during June and July. Many of our youth also were going on summer vacation or were staying out of town during the summer with relatives or parent.

In order to address these challenges, we did the following:

- Provided transportation for youth to school sites and OCBF sites for program sessions and events
- Made weekly and daily reminders of programs sessions and events

- Provided weekly raffle prizes for attendance to program sessions and events

### **BAI's Approach**

BAI's approach implemented an after-school program that incorporated an evidence-based model of change that is both culturally relevant and age appropriate for at-risk, 11-14 year old Latinas. Currently, there are no *Best Practice Models* for HIV/AIDS or substance abuse prevention for Latinas within the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention clearinghouse. However, the **Risk-Resiliency Model** developed by Hawkins, Catalano and Miller (1992) has been the basis for much of the effectively established applied research for substance abuse for underserved Latino youth and their families (CSAP, 1999, "Brief Strategic Family Therapy"). The theoretical framework suggests that there are a number of individual, family, community, school, and peer factors that increase the risk and protection for adolescent substance abuse and related risk taking behavior. For the purposes of our project, we expanded the model to include the risks for violence and school dropout.

In addition to this model, we designed the program to address a central aspect of psychological functioning and well-being, *self-esteem*. Self-Esteem is defined as an evaluation by which an individual expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval. The attitude indicates the extent to which an individual believes herself capable, significant, successful, and worthy.<sup>10</sup> Activities in recreational leadership, extracurricular activities, and academic tutoring will be used to enhance these perceptions of self-competence, self-worth, and achievement. The rationale of incorporating the self-concept into our activities was to further equip our vulnerable young Latinas with confidence to stand by their decisions, in the future, against negative peer influence; "No, I don't care to have a drink with you."

Another theoretical framework central to our plight is **Social Cognitive Theory** that emphasizes how people acquire and maintain certain behavior patterns. This theory also provides a basis for intervention by acknowledging that the environment, people, and behavior are constantly influencing each other<sup>11</sup>. Activities and events promoted social competence through education on substance abuse, sexual promiscuity and anger management as well as the installation of internal locus of control beliefs that in the end highlighted the power of choice and personal accountability.

The mechanism through which our program addresses and prevents the devastating consequences of violence and HIV-STD transmission was through the activities that fostered self-esteem and protection. Thus, the rationale behind our program model was to build resiliency. Resilient children use their time wisely and productively. They keep busy by getting involved with extracurricular activities at school, hobbies, participation in church, or other groups or clubs. Involvement increases self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment can stimulate and motivate them to achieve because they believe they have the ability to succeed.

Based on this model, we designed our program to address building resiliency and protective factors across five life level domains: individual, family, community, school,

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<sup>10</sup> Coopersmith, 1967; Rosenberg, 1986

<sup>11</sup> Bandura, 1997

and peer. The domain of the ‘individual’ is the most crucial focus for this prevention model.

The evaluation of our OWH project consisted of a pre and post assessment of youth progress in each of the goal areas, including HIV Knowledge and risk behavior, reproductive health, self concept and self esteem, coping skills and reduction of behavioral problems, and improved school performances. BAI, along with our partner organizations finalized the selection of specific measures. In addition, BAI staff were responsible for the implementation of the evaluation, data collection, data entry and data analysis of the findings.

BAI worked with program delivery staff and developed a way to gather personalized information from each girl about her experience, successes and challenges related to participation in the Chicas Con Fuerza program. We had the girls “journal” their experiences and asked that they kept an ongoing journal as a record of their experiences. We also worked with the staff and recorded actual verbal feedback on each of the sessions they attended.

### **Participant Outcomes**

A total of 46 females participated in the Chicas Con Fuerza Program. As listed in Chart 1, their age-range is between 11 and 14 years of age. Seventeen percent 17% identified themselves as Latina, 13% of the youth participants identify themselves as Mexican, 11% identify themselves as Hispanic, and the remaining 59% of the youth participants left the question blank. All youth participants were attending school. At the time of the baseline survey, the majority of the participants were either in 6<sup>th</sup> Grade (26%) or 7<sup>th</sup> Grade (35%), while the remaining in the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade (22%). The majority of the parents were employed.

The parent and youth surveys consist of a number of scales from previously established and normed instruments. Each of the scales had been administered in full, without any wording changes to the items, in order to maintain the original psychometric properties of the scales. For the project, reliability analyses were conducted for each of the scales using Cronbach Alpha.

In the table above, some scales (4) demonstrated reliability scores of .80 or higher. A number of scales (12) fell within an acceptable, range of .60 to .79. At pre-test both the Youth Self-Report Survey (YSR) and Life Style Survey Instruments most of the scales fell within an acceptable range. However, in the Youth Self-Report Survey (YSR) Instrument, both Rule-Breaking Behavior (.64) and HIV Anxiety (.66) show low reliability. In the Life Style Survey Instrument, Self-Confidence also shows low reliability (.62).

The Paired Sample T-test analysis was used to determine changes in youth attitudes, behaviors and family relations. We understand that the data analysis is somewhat limited because of the rather small sample, however, findings do suggest a number of program impacts.

For the scales measuring behavioral and emotional problems, there were notable findings. The Youth Self Report scales showed that there were several scales that showed a positive trend, including two areas, decreased Somatic Complaints and decreased Aggressive Behavior among the youth participants. There were no other significant findings within the behavioral and emotional problems.

The Life Style Survey, Self-Confidence, Attitudes Toward School, and Self-Esteem subscales showed a moderate trend toward improvement from pre to post testing. For example, there was an increase in Problem-Solving Skills among the youth participants. There was significant improvement among Risk-Related Decision Making from pre-post testing ( $p < .05$ ). At the time of entering the Chicas Con Fuerza Program, our participants showed fairly normal levels of behavioral and emotional health based on the Achenbach Youth Self-Report. Despite living in high-risk communities our participants were functioning well and our evaluation results showed the program was able to prevent any emotional or behavioral problems over the 8-month period.

Qualitative Findings - Our evaluation also examined youth “journals” to assess personal experience related to participation. A review of journals showed the following:

- Many girls indicated they enjoyed the activities and were interested in participating in community recreational activities
- Many girls participated and enjoyed the discussion of their bodies and offered questions
- Many girls participated and enjoyed the discussion of STI’s and ways to prevent infection
- Many girls participated and enjoyed the discussion of risky behavior related to substance abuse and gangs with their parents, where they expressed their feelings to their mothers
- Some girls reported they were unable to participate due to parent’s financial constraints

## **Conclusion**

Behavioral Assessment, Inc., along with our primary community partner, the Orange County Bar Foundation, successfully implemented the Chicas Con Fuerza program for at-risk Latina girls ages 11-14. Our program was planned and implemented in collaboration with a strong group of culturally competent and gender focused community partners. The program demonstrated positive outcomes in a number of personal and social arenas for our girls and we have also received community praise for our efforts. We found improvements in emotional health, behavior, and in decision-making skills among the Chicas participants.

## **Next Steps**

The Orange County Bar Foundation CBF recently submitted a proposal that will expand and enhance our successful Chicas Con Fuerza effort. We will expand our program to serve a total of 282 at-risk Latina youth ages 11-14, in Santa Ana, CA. Over the five-year grant period, 282 young, at-risk Latinas who are exposed to a number of personal, family and community risk factors. Participants will be recruited from local schools, community centers, the Orange County Bar Foundation and local courts. CHICAS will offer an intensive **9-month Core Prevention Education Intervention** that addresses risk factors for our target population across individual, family, community, school, and peer domains. Program activities will include three workshop sessions each month, along with one activity related to the monthly theme. After completing the core intervention, **Supplemental Services** will offer one group session and one activity per

month to participating girls. Through program activities, youth will receive prevention education in respect to HIV/STD infection, delinquency, gang involvement, and substance use. Activities will also focus on life and coping skills, mentoring, leadership opportunities, and recreational activities designed to build confidence and self-esteem. For the proposed project, our community partners include 1) The Orange County Bar Foundation, 2) Santa Ana Police Athletics Activity League, 3) Planned Parenthood, 4) Orange County District Attorney's Gang Prevention Program, and 5) Orange County Sheriff's Coroner and 6) Santa Ana Unified School District.

CHICAS will work to **expand the capacity** within the community to serve the needs of our target population by providing bi-annual trainings to local agencies that serve at-risk girls and their families. In addition, CHICAS will generate **community awareness** by collaborating with local health clinics, drug and alcohol coalitions, family resource centers, local schools, community agencies and community partners to plan and coordinate quarterly health fairs that address issues related to young girls.