

Developing hygiene education messages

Composition of messages

Fact Sheet 4.1 discusses the question of how to decide which behaviours should be changed in order to prevent cholera outbreaks in a community. Once that decision has been made consideration will have to be given to what to include in the message in order to influence that practice.

A message is made up of the following parts :

- The *advice* being provided ;
- The *beliefs, values and other factors* to be influenced in order to promote the behaviour ;
- The *language and pictures* that will be used to carry the message ;
- The *appeals* that will be used to persuade people to act.

Advice

The advice should be kept to the minimum necessary and should be made as easy to carry out as possible. The enabling factors, such as money, materials and time to carry out the behaviour, should already be available. There may be a tendency to try to ask the community to do more than is really necessary. A good example is the frequently delivered and usually ignored call to boil drinking water. Boiling water takes time, uses scarce fuel and is only relevant when the drinking water is contaminated. Other household water treatment may therefore be preferred because of local conditions.

Advice given in messages should have the following characteristics :

- Result in improved health ;
- Affordable ;
- Require a minimum of effort/time to put into practice ;
- Realistic ;
- Culturally acceptable ;
- Meet a felt need ;
- Easy to understand.

Beliefs and values

The messages in diarrhoea prevention programmes should be based on an understanding of the factors that influence the behaviour of the community in general and the influential persons. These include the beliefs and attitudes that the community hold about the hygiene behaviours - especially perceived benefits and disadvantages of taking action and their understanding of health, disease and hygiene (see Fact Sheet 4.3).

Language and pictures

The words used in messages should be simple to understand and familiar to the audience. It is a good idea to use the everyday terms that the community use for the subject themselves. Keep technical words and jargon to a minimum, and try to avoid a literary style. Keep sentences short.

Pictures add interest to leaflets and posters, and can help to explain difficult points and show what things look like. But take the following precautions :

- Make sure that the pictures are accurate ;
- Keep drawings simple - but include enough detail to ensure that they can be recognized ;
- Avoid distracting backgrounds ;
- If colours are used, make them accurate ;
- Symbols may not always be understood ;
- Show things their real size ; be careful with enlargements ;
- Always *pre-test* pictures to make sure that they are understood and arouse interest.

Appeals

The appeal is the way the contents of a message are organized to convince or persuade someone.

Many health educators make the mistake of relying too much on medical facts. People, especially those without much education, are often more convinced by a simple emotional appeal. Humour can sometimes help to add interest to the subject. It is a common temptation to try to frighten people into action with symbols such as death, skulls and other fear-arousing images. However, this can run the risk of leading to panic and anxiety, and should be avoided. Avoid negative advice that tells people not to do things. It is always best to be positive and tell people what they can do.

It is also better to be honest and give both advantages and disadvantages of taking action. Leaving out any drawbacks can make people suspicious and think that an attempt is being made to hide something.

Pre-testing the message

No matter how well a community is understood, there may be parts of the message that are misunderstood or interpreted differently from the original intention. Always *pre-test* the message with a group of people of similar age, educational level and culture to those the message is trying to reach. This will involve showing them the leaflet or poster, or letting them hear the radio broadcast. They should then be asked :

- Did you understand the message (could you say it aloud correctly) ?
- Was it interesting enough to hold your attention ?
- Did it tell you what you wanted to know ?
- Was the advice acceptable, realistic and believable ?
- Was there any further information that you wanted ?