The Anatomy of A Health Seeking Choice:
Uncovering a set of special attributes that promote health seeking choices among young people

Background on the Research
As part of the development of the Sport 2 Life manual for UNICEF Namibia, Edgework conducted an extensive review of relevant literature and conducted a series of interviews with experts and frontline practitioners working to promote health seeking choices among young people.

The research was undertaken to understand the “choice landscape” present among young people, especially in Namibia and to understand success factors in HIV prevention and risk reduction programmes.

What is a High Impact Attribute?
As the research progressed, a number of interesting findings began to emerge. In particular, certain correlations surfaced. The research was revealing that there was a set of attributes that, if a young person possessed one or more, seemed to correlate significantly with that young person having an increased capacity to make consistent health seeking choices.

As the research progressed, these attributes became more prominent and were reinforced in the interviews.

This list of attributes comes from a substantial literature review, whose purpose was to search for research describing and validating attributes and behaviours that are correlated with reduction in risk behaviours or an increase in health seeking behaviours in young people. A number of sources summarized below have featured prominently in the synthesis of this list.

Charles & Blum define these types of attributes as “core competencies.”¹ They list:
1. A positive sense of self
2. Self-control
3. Decision-making skills
4. A moral system of belief
5. Pro-social connectedness

Rotherman-Borus, Ingram, Swendeman and Flannery concluded that there were 10 evidence-based skills that contributed significantly to the effectiveness of successful HIV prevention programmes.² They are:
1. Belief in your own worth and your right to a happy future
2. Commitment to change
3. Ability to distinguish fact from myth
4. Ability to plan ahead and be prepared
5. Ability to practice self-control
6. Knowledge of pleasurable alternatives to high risk activities
7. Ability to negotiate verbally, not nonverbally
8. Ability to evaluate options and consequences
9. Ability to choose to limit your own freedom
10. Ability to act to help others protect themselves
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CLEAR (Choosing Life: Empowerment, Action, Results!) a US-based HIV prevention and health intervention for youth and adults age 16 and older living with HIV/AIDS or at high risk for HIV has identified five core skills that are critical to develop in HIV prevention. This programme has been packaged by the CDC’s Diffusion of Effective Behavioral Interventions (DEBI) project. The five core skills are:\n\1. Development of emotional awareness
\2. Identification of one’s ideal self
\3. Becoming competent in short- and long-term goal setting
\4. Practicing self-management and recovery problem solving
\5. Practicing assertive behaviour and communication

Additionally, interviews and research with healthy lifestyle and HIV prevention experts, and child and adolescent development experts, including Grassroot Soccer, loveLife, University of Namibia HIV Prevention Unit, NawaLife Trust Namibia, C-Change, Lifeline/Chidline, Planned Parenthood, Namibia Football Association, Special Olympics, SCORE Namibia, and USAID have contributed to the evidence base supporting the eight high impact attributes described below.

Disclaimers:
\1. Though this research was broad in scope and encompassed articles well beyond the region of this project, it was still generally targeting Namibia and southern Africa. To that end, it is not necessarily generalizable to other regions, though it our speculation that most of these attributes would show up as correlating with health seeking behaviours in other parts of the world. More research would need to be conducted to verify this claim.
\2. The above sources were used to construct this list of high impact attributes. There are certainly attributes that impact risk reduction and healthy lifestyle choices that are not on this list. This list includes attributes that had reliable evidence to support them.

Introducing the Eight High Impact Attributes
Self-Awareness
Self-awareness is a critical attribute, because it encompasses a number of other important high impact attributes. At its core, self-awareness is the ability to recognize current and emerging thoughts and feelings. This process of recognizing and naming new thoughts and feelings can potentially involve the use of self-talk. Self-talk, also known as self-coaching, is the ability to break a cycle of negative thoughts by having an internal dialogue with oneself.\n
There are two other important components inherent in self-awareness. Firstly, it involves a clear understanding of strengths, weaknesses, and needs. Secondly, self-awareness means knowing personal boundaries, comfort zones, and identifying triggers that might make you scared or nervous.

Identity
Identity refers to the way a young person sees him or herself in the world. This sense of identity helps young people recognize their importance by giving them a sense of who they are and why they matter in the world. The foundation for a strong identity involves self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-worth. Each one of these foundational qualities has been shown to be an important determinant in the health seeking behaviors of young people in Namibia.
Encouraging a strong identity is particularly important for young people living in communities that are described as “disempowered” or poverty stricken. In these environments, young people with more fragile feelings of identity can be more easily swayed by the negative influences that surround them.

Ultimately, there are two critical aspects to a strong identity. The first is critical aspect is self-identity. This refers to how a young person would describe him or herself, especially in relation to self-esteem and self-efficacy. As Charles and Blum explain, “A positive sense of self can prevent sexual risk taking and potentially mitigate its impact on development and adjustment…research suggests that the core self-evaluation traits of positive self-esteem, self-efficacy, and multidimensional self-concept are critical for avoiding high-risk sexual behavior in adolescence.”

The second critical component to identity is the idea of a group identity. Young people who have strong, positive affiliations with groups that promote health-seeking behaviors are going to be more likely to adopt those healthy behaviors.

**Situational Awareness**

Situational Awareness describes a set of skills that helps someone read their surroundings and make accurate interpretations of the situation that is unfolding around them. There are four key components of situational awareness. The first is an ability to scan the environment. This is based on the idea that it is impossible to make positive decisions without critical information of all the factors in play. This information comes from looking around, digesting, and assigning meaning to what you see.

The second key element is the power to zoom in and out to fully assess any given situation. This involves taking a step back to understand the “big picture” as well as zooming in to look closely at the details of any situation.

The third aspect of self-awareness is the ability to make accurate risk assessments. This involves identifying risk and accurately weighing the severity of the risk.

Finally, the last key component of self-awareness is the process of understanding one’s personal risk tolerance. Each individual has a subjective level of comfort and acceptance of various risks. Risk tolerance is therefore a measure of one person’s capacity to handle and accept the level of risk in any given situation.

**Plan B Thinking**

A hallmark of resilience and effective decision-making is the ability to consider multiple options, and, at the least, to ensure that you always have a back up plan in any given situation. Individuals are capable of making better decisions for their health when they have the opportunity to consider multiple solutions. This is especially true when it comes to certain high-risk situations.

This type of thinking is often referred to as “Plan B Thinking”. It describes a young person who consistently asks the following questions when they encounter risky situations.

- What are my options?
- If my initial plan doesn’t evolve as anticipated, what is my back-up plan?
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- **If x happens, what do I do?**

One key component of this type of plan B approach is “anticipatory thinking”. As the name suggests, this involves the ability to read how each situation is unfolding and anticipate what might happen next. It is a pronounced shift from the typical “wait and see” approach that many young people tend to use.

**Future Focus**
Inherent in future focus is a level of commitment, investment, and emphasis on some desired future outcome. The three major components to any future focus approach involves defining priorities, establishing a set of goals, and making plans to achieve these goals.

Defining priorities involves contemplating what matters to you the most. Priorities can include your values, beliefs, hopes, dreams, family members or friends, responsibilities, duties, or studies. Young people that function with these priorities, as anchors are more likely to make health-seeking choices. Young people without any priorities are more likely to make choices that serve an immediate need or want. This short-term focus may eventually put them at greater risk.

Setting goals refers to a commitment that you might make to the important priorities in your life. These goals are future outcomes that you aspire to. Young people with goals, with something to aspire to, are more likely to make lifestyle choices that will keep them on track to achieving their goals. Goals give young people something to live for.

Finally, planning is defined by the work that you do to maintain your priorities and achieve your goals. Planning can include creating “to-do” lists, scheduling time to follow through with your priorities, and generally thinking about the steps that you need to take to achieve all of your goals.

**Discipline**
Discipline describes a standard of behavior that allows young people to demonstrate control over their everyday life. It is often associated with some type of training or regimen plan. One key component of discipline is the concept of self-control. This refers to the ability to set personal limits and restrain from following actions that are based on impulse feelings.

Delayed gratification is an important mechanism to help promote positive discipline. This involves actively deciding to delay something pleasurable in order to enjoy it at some future moment.

One method to help promote discipline involves routines and rituals. These are activities and habits that you perform on a regular basis. When positive habits and routines are followed, a certain type of structure is put in place. This structure of discipline acts as a foundation to help individuals achieve their goals and make health-seeking choices that promote discipline.

Ultimately, being disciplined means committing to a specific behavior code. This behavior code can be a set of rules that are consistently followed over a period of time. The behavior code that is established sheds light on the actions that each individual wants to take to live a certain lifestyle. Behavior codes can include important choices about how you treat people in meet, your feelings towards drugs and alcohol, and whether or not you want to be sexually active.
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Social Confidence
Social confidence describes a young person’s ability to think, speak, and act the way they want to in a social setting, in front of peers and adults. This involves asking questions when they are unsure about something. Or potentially voicing their opinion and taking a stand for what they believe in. The idea is that a young person who has the confidence to ask questions and speak out, is more likely to do the same in high-risk situations.

This type of social confidence lies at the heart of what it takes to resist negative peer pressure. All too often, young people go quietly into risky situations even though they may have an intuition that the situation may be dangerous. And when young people lose the confidence to speak out and stand up for what they believe in, they lose control of the situation.

Each and every day a young person engages in a risky act even though they know it may be dangerous and they may not even want to do it. This is because the power of peer pressure and the desire to fit in often wins out over the internal risk assessment that a young person may be making. Social confidence is one of the most important ways that a young person can counter this pressure. Here are a number of ways that young people can gain enough social confidence to resist negative pressure.

The ability to raise your hand and ask for clarification when there is something that you are not completely sure of. This involves a desire to know as much as possible about what is going on around you and not letting shyness or fear of embarrassment get in the way of finding out what you need to know.

One key aspect of social confidence that is related to asking questions, involves specifically asking for help. This means that when you have a problem or a challenge, you are willing and comfortable to turn towards a peer or a trusted adult for assistance.

The concept of speaking with your feet and using your voice to take a stand for what you believe in is another important component of social confidence. This means that you are confident enough to voice your opinions with anyone, including peers and adults. And that you are strong enough to do whatever you have to do to protect yourself, even if it means walking out of any dangerous situation.

The ability to negotiate is another critical aspect of social confidence. This applies to young people that see more than merely black or white or yes or no in any given situation. If somebody denies you access to something that is important to you, you are confident enough to engage that person in negotiation. Through conversation, you can explore the various alternatives that are available to you and find a solution where all parties are comfortable with the negotiated outcome. These conversational and relationship building skills will help keep you safe. Ultimately, you are willing to compromise where appropriate, but not when it threatens your safety.

The final key aspect of social confidence is the ability to take a stand. This means that if you see an injustice or something that you know is wrong, you will speak out and take a stand for it. This involves assertive communication and a clear understanding of what you believe to be right and wrong.

Pro-Social Connections
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The attribute is based on the idea that young people tend to replicate the behaviors that they see around them. This applies to both health seeking and risk-taking behaviors. So the more connected youth are to positive role models and community organizations, the less likely they are to engage in risky sexual behaviors. What follows is the idea that one of the most effective ways to promote healthy lifestyles for young people is to promote pro-social connections. By spending more time with positive influences among peer groups, romantic connections, family members, and community members, a young person can improve his or her chances of living a healthy lifestyle. This is because these pro-social connections serve as a powerful protective factor for young people.

Important elements of pro-social connections include:

- Being around peers and trusted adults that actively practice healthy lifestyle behaviors.
- Having peers and adults who care about you and support your goals through any obstacles that you might face.
- Being connected to one or more adults who genuinely care about you and want to see you succeed in life.
- Being a part of something bigger in the community, something that has meaning and significance.
- Knowing what resources there are in the community and accessing them when need.

What Do These Attributes Mean for Practitioners?

The majority of approaches to HIV prevention and risk reduction promotion have focused on delivering clear messages around the specific behaviours to avoid or to practice. This is a traditional public health approach. However, for young people, this seems to not be enough. Many programmes have also realized that they need to teach and equip young people with a set of skills that go beyond the actual risk reduction behaviours. These are sometimes called life skills. Up until now we have had a speculative sense of what types of skills we should be teaching young people to better prepare them to make these difficult healthy seeking choices.

The high impact attributes give us some of the best evidence yet of what types of skills and qualities we should be developing alongside our risk reduction messaging. These attributes should be embedded inside all aspects of our intervention. We can teach them directly, we can provide practitioners with opportunities to develop competency in these attribute areas and we can conduct our own research and study of how these attributes impact the “choice landscape” of young people.
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Bibliography


