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# Adolescent Health Project Makes Waves in Paraguay

The opening of the radio program in Paraguay kicks off with throbbing rock music and ends with a chorus of voices screaming “sexo” (sex). The program, “*Con S de Sexo*” (With S as in Sex), is not exactly subtle. But then subtlety is not the best strategy in a country where adolescents are often sexually active in their early to mid-teens and many taboos discourage an open discussion of sex.



*Arte y Parte adolescent peer educators prepare for one of two weekly radio shows broadcast live from Asunción, Paraguay. Over the last five years, Arte y Parte has developed and aired almost 400 radio shows.*

When that radio show first hit the airwaves in June 1997, it was considered somewhat scandalous in this conservative Catholic country in the heart of South America. After all, nothing like it had ever been heard on the radio before. Now, almost 400 radio programs and five years later, “*Con S de Sexo*” has become a mainstay of the reproductive health landscape, airing two live shows in Greater Asunción, the capital of Paraguay, every Saturday morning.

“*Con S de Sexo*” is only one of a host of activities aimed at adolescents 15-19 in urban and periurban Asunción developed and executed by *Arte y Parte*, an adolescent reproductive health communications project implemented by PSI and its Paraguayan affiliate *Promoción y Mejoramiento de la Salud* (PROMESA). The name *Arte y Parte* takes a well-known saying, “*No tengo arte ni parte*” (it has nothing to do with me) and turns it on its head to mean “it has everything to do with me.” The group’s slogan is “*Juntos por una sexualidad responsable*” (together for



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a responsible sexuality). An independent evaluation in 2000 said it is likely that *Arte Y Parte* “contributed to the significant increase in the proportion of adolescents reporting having used a condom in their first sexual encounter.”<sup>1</sup>

When *Arte y Parte* began in 1997, no one was doing this kind of work in a sustained way in Paraguay. The repressive and pro-natalist Stroessner government, in power from 1953-1989, had opposed family planning. The advent of democracy in 1989 changed this but Paraguay had a lot of catching up to do. The contraceptive prevalence rate for modern methods among women 15-44 was only 29% in 1987<sup>2</sup> and the rates were even lower among adolescents. Sexual activity was being initiated at an increasingly earlier age, creating high rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among youth. And yet use of any method in first premarital sexual relations was only 23.5% in 1995 (15.4% modern, 8.2% traditional). Clearly, *Arte y Parte*'s time had come.

*Arte y Parte* was implemented to address the high risk of unwanted pregnancy and STIs, including HIV/AIDS, among adolescents. The project had two main goals:

- To increase knowledge of sexual and reproductive health among adolescents in order to promote responsible sexual behavior; and
- To improve communication and negotiation skills among adolescents related to sexual and reproductive health issues.



*Arte y Parte adolescent peer educators interview a soccer player for one of their weekly radio programs called “Con S de Sexo.”*

Three principal intervention strategies, which responded directly to the lack of accurate information on sexual and reproductive health issues available to adolescents, were used to meet these goals: 1) The use of peer educators; 2) adolescent-specific media product development and placement; and 3) promotion of increased media attention to adolescent reproductive health issues.

The involvement of adolescents at all stages of the project was a defining characteristic of *Arte y Parte*. A group of peer educators was recruited and became an integral part of its design and

implementation. All peer educators go through 80 hours of training in contraceptive methods, STIs, communication and negotiation, journalism, drama, sexual abuse, and reproductive health rights. New peer educators are trained on an annual basis to replace those dropping out to pursue other activities, such as college and careers. In 2001, the fifth group of peer educators was trained, bringing the total number of *Arte y Parte* graduates to 120.

In addition to the radio program described above, *Arte y Parte* developed several mass media products and alternative media activities to disseminate reproductive and sexual health-related information to youth:

- **Teen Sexuality Booklet:** “*Hablamos Claro Sobre Sexualidad*” (Let’s Talk Clearly About Sexuality) was developed. The text was reviewed and approved by reproductive health professionals and the Ministry of Health. So far, 20,000 copies have been distributed and the booklet is now in its third printing.

<sup>1</sup>Evaluation of an Adolescent Reproductive Health Communication Project, Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, 2000.

<sup>2</sup>Encuesta Nacional de Salud Materno Infantil: 1998 (ENSMI-98).

- **Videos:** Four 15-minute videos on contraceptive methods, STIs, HIV/AIDS, and communication and negotiation were professionally produced.
- **School Workshops:** Three workshops per week are given in low-income high schools by *Arte y Parte*. Both the booklet and the videos described above were developed mainly for use in these workshops. So far, more than 50,000 youth have participated in these workshops.
- **Street Theatre:** Four different theatrical skits were developed and aimed at out-of-school youth. Peer educators work directly with professional actors who develop the acting skills of the youth.
- **News Flashes:** Sixty short, 60-second news flashes concerning facts about reproductive health, called “Infosex” are produced each year and are given to six radio stations who play them 4-5 times per day for free.
- **Free Mass Media:** Free space for articles regarding adolescent reproductive health was offered by three daily newspapers. The magazine “Top Teen” gave *Arte y Parte* free space for a monthly column about adolescent reproductive health. Countless other articles and interviews on *Arte y Parte* activities and sexual health issues have been published and aired in the last five years.



Surprisingly, all of these innovative, potentially controversial activities implemented by *Arte y Parte* in the glare of the mass media attracted no opposition—until August 1998. In that month, a new, more conservative government took power which emboldened a Catholic parents’ organization to launch an attack on “*Hablamos Claro Sobre Sexo*.” The group called for withdrawal of the booklet from the schools, saying it promoted condoms excessively and downplayed abstinence even though the booklet said in its introduction that “our intention is not to encourage sexual relations between adolescents” and that “only abstinence is 100% effective.” The project published an open letter in the major daily newspapers explaining the project and the *Arte y Parte* coordinator gave many interviews to the mass media defending the booklet. After two weeks, the controversy died down. Little opposition to *Arte y Parte* has been publicly expressed since that time.

Some changes were made to the second edition of the booklet to address the concerns about the first edition: A chapter on communication and negotiation was added, some illustrations were changed, more information was presented on traditional methods, and the title was changed to “*Hablamos Claro Sobre Sexualidad*.”

Three months later, *Arte y Parte* won an award for educating youth at a TV awards ceremony. In the presence of the Minister of Health, who was known to oppose modern methods of family planning, these words were spoken: “This is a group of youth who dared to speak out clearly on a topic that could not be talked about in our country. They talk about sexuality... Congratulations to this group who, three months ago, were strongly criticized and who today, are applauded.” Eight months later, *Arte y Parte* won “Best Documentary” for its contraception video.

In 1998, after *Arte y Parte* had been active for one and a half years, the ENSMI-98 study showed that the contraceptive prevalence rate for modern methods among women 15-44 had increased from 41.3% in 1995 to 47.7%. Moreover, among women aged 15-24, use of a contraceptive method in first premarital sexual relations had increased from 23.5% to 33.2%.

In 1999, the first two and a half years of the project were evaluated by a local research agency under the supervision of the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. The evaluation found that the *Arte y Parte* project reached 44% of youth in its target area with at least one of its activities/products, with radio having the greatest reach. The findings suggested that the project increased knowledge of selected reproductive health issues among adolescents and appears to have increased the proportion of adolescents who subscribe to certain attitudes/beliefs (e.g. that both partners are responsible for protection when having sex). Although no changes in behavior could be attributed specifically to the project, the report said: “It is likely that the project contributed to the significant increase in the proportion of adolescents reporting having used a condom in their first sexual encounter.”





Since 1997, PSI's affiliate in Paraguay, PROMESA, has been giving reproductive health workshops like this one, in a low-income secondary school of greater Asunción, through its adolescent project *Arte y Parte*.

The evaluation stated: "A major contribution of the project was towards a weakening of social taboos against open discussion of adolescent sexual and reproductive health issues in Paraguay, thereby setting the stage for these issues to be addressed in a more comprehensive manner in the future."

However, the evaluation found that the project was not as successful in reaching out-of-school and poorer youth. A decision made during the second year of the project to emphasize school workshops over street theatre appears to have been largely responsible. However, the evaluation showed evidence that when the out-of-school and poorer youth were reached, project activities may have been more effective in influencing their activities and beliefs than with the in-school and more affluent youth.

The following are some of the key lessons emerging from the *Arte y Parte* experience:

- Mass media interventions can effectively reach large numbers of adolescents at modest cost.
- As in most communications interventions, market segmentation and message targeting are crucial in interventions aimed at adolescents, as adolescents are not a homogenous group.
- While radio programming and street theatre presentations were successful in reaching Paraguayan youth, they may not be the most effective way of providing in-depth information.
- More continuous and intense interventions may be necessary in the future in order to promote more significant behavior changes.
- In conjunction with mass media interventions, it is also important to ensure that resources (e.g., counselors, youth centers, hotlines, and youth-friendly reproductive health services) are available to provide help to youth.
- No evidence was found supporting the belief that discussion of sexual and reproductive health issues will act as an invitation for youth to be promiscuous and have sexual relations.

*Arte y Parte* was always meant to serve as a model and encourage similar efforts both in Paraguay and other countries. To that end, *Arte y Parte* has developed a replication manual which explains the various steps necessary in developing a project of this type. *Arte y Parte* has inspired similar projects and activities in Albania, Central America, and Cuba.

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