

Voices on Vax - Engaging Youth to Promote Covid Vaccination

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SPEAKERS

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Rahne Alexander

Welcome to the Hopkins Press Podcast. My name is Rahne Alexander, and I am the senior publicist for the journals division of Hopkins Press. Today, we are talking with the authors of a recent article that appears in [Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education and Action](#). The article is entitled, "[The Voices on Vax Campaign: Lessons Learned from Engaging Youth to Promote COVID Vaccination](#)." This article tells the story of how several organizations, including the [Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health](#) and [Hip Hop Public Health](#) united efforts to create an art- and music-driven campaign to help young people in the city of Baltimore recognize the importance of vaccination in response to the COVID pandemic, and to become advocates for their own health care. To accompany this podcast release, we're unlocking this article so everyone will be able to read freely through the end of November. Find a link to the article in the show notes. Let's begin. Let's talk with Tamar Mendelson of Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Lori Rose Benson and Lindsey Harr of Hip Hop Public Health and Voices on Vax youth ambassador, Taylor Clinton.

Rahne Alexander

Thank you everybody for being on this episode of the Hopkins Press Podcast. Do you mind if maybe we go around and everybody introduces themselves really quickly, maybe starting with you, Tamar?

Tamar Mendelson

Sure. It's a pleasure to be here. Thanks for having us on. I'm Tamar Mendelson, and I am a professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and I direct the [Center for Adolescent Health](#) at Hopkins.

Lori Rose Benson

Hi, I'm Lori Rose Benson. I'm the Executive Director and CEO of a nonprofit called Hip Hop Public Health. Wonderful to be here.

Lindsey Harr

Thanks so much for having us. Rahne. I'm Lindsey Harr. I'm the Chief Program and Operations Officer at Hip Hop Public Health.

Taylor Clinton

Hi. Thank you so much for having me. I'm Taylor Clinton, a youth ambassador and CEO, and a new mom. So happy to be here.

Rahne Alexander

Yay. Congratulations! Well, you've built quite a team for this project. Can you talk a little bit about the process of building this team out and maybe tell the listeners a little about what each partner brought to the table?

Taylor Clinton

I can start. So I was one of three ambassadors who got the chance to receive some really helpful training that prepped us to be on the front lines for the vaccine, and not only gave me the confidence to talk about it with others, but it also made me feel more comfortable getting vaccinated myself. And as a graphic designer and social media manager, creating content, you know, for [Voices on Vax](#) came naturally, and I love being able to use my skills to spread the word in the way that I feel resonated with my community.

Lori Rose Benson

I guess I'll pick up from Taylor. From Hip Hop Public Health's perspective, this was such a beautiful partnership, and bringing together the academic, the research, the on-the-ground, the theoretical, and then blending it with music, art and culture. So it was just such a beautiful partnership, and everyone brought very specific skills and perspective to the table. And so from Hip Hop Public Health, we're all about improving health communication, public health and health education through culturally relevant experiences, mostly music, very multisensory, but also through the conduits of trusted messengers. And so working with someone like Taylor and all of her other colleagues who were the Youth Ambassadors was just such a wonderful and really important piece of this project coming together.

Tamar Mendelson

And as director of the Center for Adolescent Health, our mission as a center is really to engage with young people and with partners in different sectors, including the health department. And so we had gotten this really unusual opportunity through the CDC, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. We as a center have a history of being funded by the CDC as a Prevention Research Center for many years, and during the Covid pandemic the CDC wanted to fund its prevention research centers to really launch cutting edge ways of promoting vaccine uptake and education. And so through that funding, we were able to build this amazing coalition, as you've already been hearing about, right? So in addition to our partnership with Hip Hop Public Health, we were able to work with our very close partner, [HeartSmiles](#), which is a nonprofit that builds youth leadership and is just an incredible grassroots organization. HeartSmiles was able to link us with Taylor and the other incredible young people, and then we also partnered with Baltimore City Public Schools and with the Baltimore City Health Department so that we could really help to gather data on what was happening in Baltimore, but also really publicize this website, get the messaging out there. And we had additional support from the Hopkins Vaccine Safety Institute, which knows a lot about vaccines.

Lindsey Harr

The other piece of this partnership that was really important was that at Hip Hop Public Health, we had received a CDC Foundation grant to help support our community immunity work, specifically the teen takeover project, creating those songs, videos and educational materials. So that dovetailed beautifully with the work that we were doing with Dr. Mendelson and HeartSmiles and the team in Baltimore.

Rahne Alexander

So you were targeting youth populations for this, and so you took a "mobile-first" approach, and I assume that's because more young people are going to have access to mobile technologies. Was that assumption correct? And was that approach as effective as you expected it to be?

Taylor Clinton

I think so, and this was one of the reasons why I was so excited to be an ambassador for Voices on Vax, because social media is my thing, and so knowing that younger audiences typically access the internet via their phones, using that as like a leverage to spread positive messages about the Covid vaccine, I feel worked perfectly for us.

Lori Rose Benson

I would also add, at that time, it was during the pandemic. It was during a time where there was not a ton of gathering, and so being able to use other methodologies to really engage young people and meet them where they are, all of us where we are — probably too much of the time — but especially at a time where there wasn't a lot of in-person interaction as well.

Rahne Alexander

And you used two theories of behavioral change, and I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about what those mean.

Lindsey Harr

Yeah, the [Child-Mediated Health Communication Model](#), which is really all about the power of young people as advocates, trusted messengers and voices with their families and communities to share information and to help spark those really important conversations that need to happen around big decisions in this case, like understanding the covid vaccine and deciding whether or not to get it. And at Hip Hop Public Health, our founders' research has showed that tailoring messages for young people has a positive impact on health literacy within their families. And so we were really relying on that research and that approach as a big part of this project, and this theory of behavior change behind it.

Lori Rose Benson

And also to add on to that, you know, young people who are under the age of 18 didn't have the agency to make that decision, right, whether or not to get the vaccine. So being able to empower them through this really interesting health literacy approach, to build their own health literacy, but then to be able to have those conversations with the trusted adult in their life who does make those health decisions was really, really important and a critical part of this process.

The other piece of the model, which is a mouthful, the [Multisensory Multilevel Education Model](#), is really the core of what we do at Hip Hop Public Health, and it really looks at the intersection of art and culture and science sort of overlaid on the social ecological framework. And so without getting too wonky, we think about the young person at the center and how policies and programs may impact them from an interpersonal level to intrapersonal, what happens in their families to the community level, school level and beyond, right? So when we develop resources, we think about how it could interact like in this case, we were targeting young people, but they didn't have the agency to make that decision about the vaccine, so that was a really critical piece to have that family, trusted adult connection there, right? But then we layer on a different component for engagement.

So when we say art, primarily at Hip Hop Public Health, we think about music and the power of learning through music. Our founder, Dr. Olajide Williams, who's a neurologist and dean at Columbia University Medical Center, he would say, if he was here, that there's more real estate in our brain for music than language itself. So we know that when we learn something, we're going to learn it faster. We're going to retain it better. And then if you can connect from a cultural perspective. So that's that other piece, right? So if you're going to connect with music that resonates culturally, it will be even deeper. And then if you have an emotional connection with that content, it could be even deeper, right? So that really just builds that deepening of health literacy and hopefully on a path towards health behavior change.

And then the last part of it is that sort of science component. And when we think about science, is not just the neuroscience of how we learn through music, but the science of using evidence-based approaches, the science of using data to drive decisions, like working with Tamar's center and all of the incredible research that they're doing day in and day out? And then the science of behavior change and understanding that there is a pathway. It doesn't happen all at once, but the steps that can take from thinking about a decision and contemplation to building skills, building habits and then ultimately taking action on a decision. So that's how the Multisensory Multilevel Health Education Model comes together.

Tamar Mendelson

And I would just add that I had never heard of the Child-Mediated Health Communication Model before I met you guys. But we have just seen, we really see every day how amazing young people are as communicators and messengers for change. If a young person is talking about something, it gets attention in a way that it just doesn't from a researcher, and that's true for both adult audiences and youth audiences, right? So I was already really on board with this idea that, hey, we really want young people to be not only at the table, but really in leadership roles with this.

Lori Rose Benson

If I could add to that also, when our founder was coming up with the with the model for all of this work, he looked actually to a lot of what we see in marketing and advertising. And you know how maybe advertisers and marketers would target young people to get parents to do, maybe what they didn't want to do or buy what they didn't need to buy. That "pester power." When you're in the supermarket and your child is tugging at your sleeve about this particular cereal or that particular thing, and so why not harness that for public health and for health education from a positive perspective?

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, that seems especially empowering, because I know how difficult it can be to advocate for one's own health care. But I think you touched on some of what I wanted to ask in my next question. But maybe, maybe we can hear a little from Taylor on this too, about just what do you think the effectiveness was of this approach, of using art and especially music in getting this word out and connecting your target audience with this project?

Taylor Clinton

Yeah, I think art and music played a huge role in our reach the youth to the youth in Baltimore, like Lori was saying, we focused on visual, urban art that reflected, local culture, as well as music genres like hip hop and rap, which I feel have a strong connection with my community. And by doing this, I feel that we humanized Voices on Vax's message and made it more relatable to my peers. I think by taking this approach, it, it kind of opened the door for other youth to know that they can trust us as a credible source, especially during a time like the pandemic, because again, like we kind of mentioned before, a lot of youth at the time were on their phones and on social media, so it was very easy for them to be pulled kind of negatively when it came to the vaccination. So just having us, and again, using the approach of music and art and just different things that we knew would catch my peers, I think definitely worked for us.

Lindsey Harr

And one additional piece of this project that I think is important to note, along with that power of music and the power of young people, is also making it really as specific to a place and to the audience as possible. So one of the things that we did in this project was we held focus groups with young people and their families in Baltimore, and then we took the community immunity resources, the songs and the videos, and we kind of remixed them and like "Baltimoreized" them in a way. We made them more reflective of Baltimore, there are scenes in the videos of the Baltimore waterfront and other well-known, recognizable places in Baltimore. So we really wanted to make the message and sort of how the message was conveyed, feel very specific and personal to the audiences we were trying to reach.

Rahne Alexander

Some of that material is still available; people can find that, right?

Lori Rose Benson

Absolutely, yeah, in Hip Hop Public Health's Learning Studio, which is hhph.org, we have an online learning studio filled with over 250 free resources, and they can find the entire [Community Immunity](#) collection. And also there's a collection in Spanish, *Inmunidad Comunidad*. And was also really fun on the *Community Immunity* collection, you'll see a behind-the-scenes video of the making of it, with some of the HeartSmiles — the Heart Beats — that participated in this, in the musical component, and that lent their voices and their talent and their expertise. It was Young Elder, TavyBandz and Soul, and they talk about their reflection of songwriting, of how they never thought that they would ever write songs about something medical, let alone Covid and the vaccine, you know, what they learned along the process. And they came together with our unbelievable producer-composer Artie Green in his home studio, because this is, you know, this is Covid, with everyone masked up and taking their mask off just to get into the recording booth, if you can imagine. It was a really wonderful experience, and hearing

from the artists about their growth musically, but also their growth. Not everyone necessarily was excited about a vaccine at the start of the project, and they learned a lot, and then their hearts and minds changed, and then they felt really compelled to share that with peers as well.

Rahne Alexander

That's great. And this got the attention of some other media outlets, right? Did I see that there was some BBC attention that came to this?

Lori Rose Benson

Yeah, yeah, actually, and that this has had a nice, sort of long life, because that was just a few months ago — BBC did a whole series around vaccines and mis- and dis-information, and did a beautiful one-on-one interview with Young Elder about her experience. They did a beautiful feature on their Instagram as well, which is nice. Rewinding back, there was a wonderful PBS News Hour piece done at the very start of the work, even before we had the support or funding to create the resources. And we said, "Okay, we're going to do this." There was the interview with TayyBandz and Young Elder, and even DMC, one of our incredible artist advisory board members, Darryl DMC McDaniels from Run-DMC. And then they also were able to capture a little bit of the recording process when it actually came to fruition. So yeah, being able to share this, I would say, eclectic but important collaboration, is something that you would love to see other institutions and organizations at the grassroots level come together, because being able to bring these voices, young people with this incredible talent and peer-to-peer influence, along with the backbone of the organization, like Tamar's Center for Adolescent Health and a nonprofit that cares deeply about this work as well is just such a great way to approach what might be coming up down the road when it comes to other public health issues and concerns.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, well, going off of that, do you see more opportunities that are rooted in this work? And what are what are you all working on now?

Lori Rose Benson

Do you want to talk a little bit about that Taylor, do you want to share anything first?

Taylor Clinton

Sure. So for me, I'm definitely still on the graphic design and social media portion, just using my work to help other organizations and believe it or not, I still get questions about the vaccine to this day and why I chose to be a part of voices on that and if I liked it or not. Because a lot of times when you join the organization, especially as a youth, we may not be joining it because we absolutely want to, but because, you know, we're getting paid, or because our parents told us to, but this is actually something that I wanted to be a part of, because, like I said earlier, I wanted to inform my community and also inform myself before getting vaccinated without any prior information on it. But moving forward, I look forward to working more on things like this in the future.

Tamar Mendelson

The Center has, the center always has a lot of stuff happening, and so we've been focused on a lot of upstream issues that impact adolescent health, including food insecurity and kind of the context that

young people are living in, including vacant lots, and what happens when we actually plant trees and change those lots into green spaces. So you know, lots going on from that space, I think Lori and Lindsey, you may want to talk more on the physical health angle of things.

Lindsey Harr

Well, we certainly we have a number of resources at Hip Hop Public Health that are focused on helping young people and families get active, because we know that's so good for all of us, not only physically, but also for our mental health. One of the projects that we're on the verge of launching, it will be launching on October 22, is a brand new resource collection called [The ABCs of Me](#), which is for elementary-aged young people and their families. It's all about the fundamental skills and attitudes and behaviors around having healthy relationships in the context of friends and families. So, learning about things like autonomy, boundaries and consent at a young age, sharing your toys, deciding whether you want to go over to someone's house for a sleepover or not, how to respond when someone says, "No, they don't want to play with you right now." All of these things are so important, and so we're really excited about this new resource collection. We worked with some incredible artists on it, and I think it's a great example of using the approaches and the models that we've been talking about here today that Child-Mediated Health Communication Model, the Multisensory Multilevel Health Education Model, really engaging young people and their families who gave us a lot of input during the creation of this process to create a resource that speaks to some really current needs in a way that is fun and accessible, and breaks down some complex and sometimes challenging topics in a way that can be really transformative and lay a foundation for really strong health and long-term healthy relationships at all points in life for young people.

Taylor Clinton

And just really quickly, I definitely think understanding community dynamics and how culturally relevant messaging can build stronger connections. I think that's really important to know also, if anyone else is looking to do any kind of outreach, specifically around getting any kind of message out, I think that for this kind of outreach, I've definitely learned that knowing your audience and tailoring your approach is important. I think that this engagement does have the potential for lasting benefits, such as fostering trust in healthcare and encouraging proactive health behaviors like vaccination. So I hope that other organizations, or just people who work in health care would do something like this. I hope that they can look at Voices on Vax as a maybe a stepping stool, or just a tool to use to benefit from when doing this type of work.

Tamar Mendelson

Thanks for that, Taylor. And you know, I do think that the model that we used of coming together, you know, we had six different partners in this work, including the health department. And so thinking about projects that bring together these different partners that include young people and that really get creative in terms of messaging, I think these kinds of strategies can be useful across just such a range of different public health issues. So I would encourage others to brainstorm, think through, how can young people show their talents and help lead the way toward better health?

Lindsey Harr

And I think also, sort of piggybacking on what Tamar and Taylor just said as well, really the power of partnerships in terms of being able to mobilize quickly all of us working in the public health and the health education space during Covid really had to come together very swiftly in order to respond to what was going on and also adjust based on incoming information and new data. Like, what the messages were, what the key information was, and so having a group of really strong partners at the table who bring various expertise, I think, was really key in being able to get this project up and running and out in the world on what was really a very short timeline.

Rahne Alexander

Well, thank you all for being here. Excited to have you on the Hopkins Press Podcast.

Interviewees

Thanks for having us.

Rahne Alexander

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The music featured in today's episode is by Jean Toba, which you can find on the Free Music Archive, also linked at the podcast information page. Thanks again for listening, and we hope you see you next time on the Hopkins Press Podcast.