

The Peer Family Experience

The PATH-led Peer Family (PF) Program was one of AMKENI's most unique and successful interventions. AMKENI was a USAID/Kenya funded project aimed at improving the health of Kenyans through increased utilization of integrated family planning, reproductive health, and child survival services, including HIV and AIDS, in Western and Coast provinces from 2001 to 2006. AMKENI was implemented by EngenderHealth with PATH, FHI, IntraHealth; PATH was responsible for community interventions.

The role of the family

The PF approach was developed in response to community members' comments during the creative workshops held in the initial stages of the project. Parents felt unable to talk with their children about reproductive health issues, and children were choosing not to ask their parents about their health and development; husbands would not talk to their wives, and wives felt they could not talk with their husbands. With such a lack of communication, individuals had little chance of addressing their health concerns and needs. Given this situation, AMKENI, with technical direction from PATH, decided to try something new. In a departure from the usual approach of reproductive health projects – working with men, women, and youth separately – PATH brought individuals together to explore health issues as a family. Roles, relationships, power dynamics, communication, and decision-making within a family greatly impact the health of individual members. By working with families, PATH hoped to increase the family's ability to live healthier lives and take action positively affecting their health.



Photo: PATH, Mike Wang

Peer family members role play during a meeting

Peer Family Discussion Groups

Community members participated in the creation of the PF intervention. The concept of family-to-family communication included interactions between members of a family unit (e.g., parents and their children), as well as between separate families (e.g., two families in the same village). The first step was to define the peer family units as being comprised of a father, a mother, and two adolescent-aged children (one male, one female), allowing for equal representation from both the younger and older generations, as well as males and females. PATH worked with villages and churches to develop strict criteria and application procedures, and community members participated in the screening and selection of PFs. Twenty-four Peer Family Discussion Groups, each with a minimum of six Peer Families, participated in a weekly exploration of relationships and health issues and a discussion of health-enhancing family values and behaviors. Specially-trained village animators or church-based facilitators facilitated the Discussion Groups using specific skills for moderating sensitive discussions.

Lasting impact

This program helped families develop a deeper understanding of the impact of family roles, relationships and communication on health-related problems and solutions. As participating family members acquired skills, discussed real-life situations, re-defined roles, and sought health solutions, their insights were discussed with other interested families and community members.

During AMKENI, PFs discussed and implemented a range of activities, including gaining a better understanding of reproductive health issues; sharing family experiences and challenges; analyzing family roles, relationships and health problems; and linking with village health committees, local administrators, and service providers. Through formal assessments and anecdotal reports, PATH has learned that in addition to an increase in utilization of health services and products, families reported greater sharing and communication between family members as a result of participation in the peer family groups. Even seemingly small changes like joint budgeting, planning, and eating meals together are big steps and reflect the significant changes families have made as they move toward making healthy decisions together.

PATH improves the health of people around the world by advancing technologies, strengthening systems, and encouraging healthy behaviors.

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