

# New Insights In Sexual Health Podcast: Engaging Young Men

with Matthew Rivas-Koehl and Sam Beckwith  
and hosted by Catherine Schaefer

## Catherine Schaefer (00:00):

Hello, and welcome to the New Insights in Sexual Health podcast. New Insights in Sexual Health is an innovative effort funded by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) to enhance STI (sexually transmitted infection) screening and treatment, strengthen partnerships, and build capacity for lasting impact. I'm Catherine Schaefer, a research analyst at Child Trends, a nationwide nonprofit dedicated to research that helps children thrive. Today's episode is on building trust in promoting sexual health among young men. Our guests are Dr. Matthew Rivas-Koehl and Dr. Sam Beckwith, both research scientists at Child Trends. Dr. Rivas-Koehl is an expert in interpersonal relationships and sexual health topics, and Dr. Beckwith specializes in adolescent well-being, especially adolescent sexual and reproductive health. Welcome to the podcast. So first I want to get right to the point. I know anyone can get an STI. So why is it important to focus on some prevention efforts on young men?

## Sam Beckwith (00:58):

Thank you, Catherine, for having us. This is Sam. So we want to focus prevention efforts on young men because there are over 20 million new sexually transmitted infections or STIs reported in the U.S. each year, and almost half of those cases occur among young adults. So those are those ages 15 to 24. Compared with young women, young men are much less likely to be tested and therefore to be treated for STIs. And that's despite the fact that some STIs like syphilis, they're more common among young men. And additionally, many common STIs like chlamydia and trichomoniasis, they're asymptomatic. So there might be a lengthy delay between STI infection getting the STI diagnosis and treatment. That can increase the harm for young men from an infection that hasn't been treated, and it can increase the likelihood of unknowingly spreading the infection to their partner or partners. So putting all that together, it's clear that STI related services and information, they're not getting to young men to the extent that's needed, and that leads to increased risks or harms not only for the young men themselves,

but also for the community more broadly.

**Catherine Schaefer (02:12):**

Yeah, I can see how all that would come together to create an especially tough situation for health departments and for clinicians too. We know that delayed testing and diagnosis can increase the likelihood that STIs will be spread to others within a community. So what are some of the things that we can do to promote sexual health in young men and stop that spread of STIs?

**Matthew Rivas-Koehl (02:33):**

Yeah, thanks for having us, Catherine. This is Matthew. One of the things that we want to do is ensure that local public health and clinical providers are knowledgeable about men's STI related needs. The idea here is that we want to get more males in the door, but up to this point, some clinical staff might not have had as much experience delivering male-centered STI care and therefore may be less familiar. So it's important to provide needed supports and professional development opportunities to ensure that these providers are well-equipped to meet the needs of young men.

**Catherine Schaefer (03:08):**

Right. It's incredibly important for providers to be in tune with the populations and what they need. Can you give me some examples of what that looks like?

**Matthew Rivas-Koehl (03:16):**

Yeah, so having periodic trainings to ensure that staff within your organization can recognize and speak to the importance of men's overall sexual health, including STI prevention and treatment services, can be really helpful. And these trainings can be done in house. So maybe you have an experienced and knowledgeable member of your own staff that could provide a training, but you can also invite experts from other local providers if you have universities or advocacy organizations in your area, especially those that specialize in sexual and reproductive health of males. These can be great opportunities to involve those organizations too.

**Sam Beckwith (03:54):**

This can be formal or informal. So like Matthew said, you can bring in experts, you can have something that's a little bit more structured, but you can also take the

opportunity to just have informal brown bags or lunch conversations to build your staff sort of comfort and knowledge about working with young men.

**Catherine Schaefer (04:09):**

Okay. So once you have those trainings and you've increased your capacity to treat young men, what are some ways that you want to reach out and let them know about services? How do you make sure the services are actually tailored to their needs?

**Sam Beckwith (04:24):**

That's a really good question, and there's no sort of single answer because the specific needs of young men, they vary across communities, but they also vary within communities, between different individuals and different groups of people. So to ensure that you're best meeting the needs of the young men in your community, it's really important to think about engaging them directly, for instance, by establishing a youth advisory board. So even the best experts on adolescents, even the highest credentials really can't give you insight as well as just hearing directly from young people themselves.

**Catherine Schaefer (05:00):**

Yeah, I've definitely heard about a youth advisory board being really helpful for lots of the programs, especially those that address sexual health. So if someone wanted to start a youth advisory board, how would they decide who should be included and where can they get more information about how to start a youth advisory board?

**Sam Beckwith (05:18):**

So I'd say at the outset, the most important thing about a youth advisory board is that the youth who participate in it, they feel ownership over their position. They feel like their voices are being heard. So really just start out with the expectation that you will actually be listening to and implementing their suggestions and taking their feedback seriously in order for the whole project to really work. There are lots of guides and resources about creating youth advisory boards online. So the Family and Youth Services Bureau, they have a lot of links. If you go on their website and you search, for example, youth adult partnerships, those resources can help you begin to recruit young people to help guide your programming and ensure that they're authentically involved in decision making.

**Matthew Rivas-Koehl (06:03):**

Yeah, and youth advisory boards can be really helpful across your organization for a lot of, meeting a lot of different needs for youth. And this goes without saying, but we're specifically focusing on males today. So you want to make sure, if you're thinking about establishing a youth advisory board, that you take steps to ensure that young males actually do become involved in these advisory boards too. You want that representation.

**Catherine Schaefer (06:27):**

Yeah. So once they're involved, what are some kinds of ways that youth can contribute to the sexual health program? What can they do?

**Matthew Rivas-Koehl (06:35):**

So some of the ways that you can promote young men's involvement in the Youth Advisory Board and in your organization could be to feature them in public facing media. And this gives them an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership in the community, to their family, to their peers. Other ways you can involve them are asking them to review materials before they're released to the public. So an example of this could be consulting them on language for social media posts about say, upcoming health department events. And one thing I really want to emphasize here is that if you are going to, say, consult youth about language on something that's going to be public facing, it's important that you take their feedback seriously and you actually implement this feedback to promote their investment. So you can think of a lot of ways that youth can play small but very important roles in your organization, and that really helps them feel invested in the work.

**Catherine Schaefer (07:28):**

That sounds great and really helpful for campaigns that want to increase their STI awareness among young men. I want to go back a little bit to this messaging that you mentioned. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

**Sam Beckwith (07:41):**

So I think at the very highest level, one of the most critical messages about STIs is the message that anybody who's sexually active can and should protect their health with STI-related services. And anybody, that this is true for anyone and everyone who's sexually active, many existing resources and guides related to STI

testing and prevention services, you can think about TV commercials, posters, ads on social media, flyers that are handed out at events. They do focus on specific populations. For instance, you might see a lot of pictures, photographs of women or gay or bisexual men in relationships in those materials. And so that's great. As a result, there might be an inadvertent implication that STI prevention and testing services are not for all young men. So to overcome that, you can really just ensure that some of your messaging materials include illustrations or photographs of young men to remind them that STI services are for them. So there are media campaigns and existing toolkits like the CDC's Get Yourself Tested campaign that provide really helpful ways to spread the word about how and where young men can access STI testing that you can leverage.

**Catherine Schaefer (09:04):**

Yeah, it's definitely important to include men in messaging and in the media campaigns to dispel that myth that sexual health concerns are mostly for people with other identities. I can see how it's critical to tailor your message, but how do you make sure that it's received? What are some tips for outreach?

**Matthew Rivas-Koehl (09:21):**

Yeah, I think this outreach component can be really intimidating sometimes, but remember that you don't have to reinvent the wheel. So partnering with organizations that are already engaging young men, especially in populations or in communities where STIs are more prevalent, that's one way to effectively reach and build trust with this population. And this doesn't require you to develop new infrastructure, but rather you're capitalizing on the infrastructure that's already there. And also partners who have good rapport with young men already can really help you minimize the stigma associated with STIs and build trust in working with those youth.

**Catherine Schaefer (10:01):**

Yeah. So I hear that you want to include other organizations and other groups. What kinds of organizations make good partners?

**Matthew Rivas-Koehl (10:09):**

Sure. So one thing that comes to mind, particularly for young males, is maybe amateur sports clubs or even a local minor league or semi-professional sports team. Sporting events, for example, I was recently at a 5K run where the local

health department had a booth and was doing rapid STI testing, and they were also giving out running related swag. So they had the swag bags with water bottles and things like that that were branded with the public health department's logo. So that made it feel a lot more approachable. But other partner organizations could be other types of men's groups in your communities. Maybe these are at rec centers, maybe they're at places of worship. Of course, Boys and Girls clubs and other organizations that offer out of school time programming can be helpful to partner with for reaching young males. And then we definitely want to think about places where youth might be overlooked too. So youth shelters, juvenile justice programs, other youth centers that are sort of serving specific populations too. Those are some things that come to mind for me.

**Sam Beckwith (11:21):**

You can also look into establishing or leading into your partnerships with local education institutions too. So if there are high schools in your community, for instance, that you have or could build a relationship with, there might be school-sponsored student organizations there that are interested in partnering with you as well as school-based health centers that are already providing some health services for the young people who go to school there, as well as community colleges. There might be many opportunities to partner with community colleges and either have them refer to you or you could go to their physical location and work there.

**Matthew Rivas-Koehl (11:57):**

That's a great point, Sam. And that reminds me too that I was involved in sexual health peer education when I was doing my undergraduate at a university, and we partnered with the local health department to increase STI testing both on campus, but also kind of using that reputation and trust of the college campus to increase testing in the community too.

**Sam Beckwith (12:23):**

Very cool.

**Catherine Schaefer (12:24):**

That's great. Yeah. So I'm hearing that you're messaging directly to men in the places where they're likely to spend time. So once you've made those first connections, once you've gotten those partners, what should you do next?

**Sam Beckwith (12:38):**

One immediate step is to really engage your partners in sharing some of the most important messages about young men's sexual health and STIs. So for example, you could encourage them to share statistics and facts about STI prevention, testing, or treatment with their young male clientele or their young men who participate with them. It's also really powerful if you can share, in particular, local statistics that describe the community that young men that you serve live in. So if it's possible you could share statistics or takeaways from any STI-related data that you've collected with your local health department, share that with your partners and encourage them to do the same. It's also important to remind your partners that facts are really important here. So they should be grounding any messaging about STIs in the data and that they should be aware of stigma, anxieties, potentially myths that young men are thinking about that they're experiencing when they're seeking STI related care.

**Matthew Rivas-Koehl (13:44):**

Yeah, I think being equipped with this information and knowledge is really important. And if we're thinking about actually engaging with young men in practice, one thing that comes to mind too is, if at all possible, finding opportunities to hire or involve male facilitators. And if that's not possible, maybe representatives from your partners who are males that could sort of be relatable messengers to young males about the importance of STI prevention for young men. And I want to be clear too, that it is not only male facilitators or other males that can reach young men. All clinical staff can do that, but if we're strategizing about certain ways to involve men, that's one option to consider as well.

**Catherine Schaefer (14:33):**

Yeah, I can definitely see that. So let's delve a little bit deeper. Now that we know how to approach making connections with men, I want to think a little bit more broadly about some of the ideas that they might have about STIs. So what kinds of messages do you think that they get from our broader society?

**Sam Beckwith (14:50):**

Where do we start? I think that really broadly, STIs are not too different from other medical topics in that young people are really likely to encounter and spread myths and misinformation about STIs. But STIs, it's a little bit more salacious, it's a little bit more intimidating. Maybe they don't have trusted sources

of information so that a problem could be magnified a bit. There was one national study of youth that found that about one in five believed that most of their peers didn't know that STIs could be transmitted through oral sex. So there's a lot of maybe concerns about the baseline level of familiarity that many young people might have. About STIs, they can also be misinterpreted in ways that can particularly affect young men. So for instance, some people might misinterpret the fact that some, not all, but some STIs can be more consequential for women. The idea that some STIs can lead to infertility if left untreated. Some people interpret that to be a sign that STIs are not actually a major health concern for young men. And beliefs like that can result in young men ignoring other elements of STI prevention and care as well. They might fail to recognize that even if a man's health consequences from an STI or minimal, they could have severe consequences for one's female partner or partners once transmitted. So there's a lot of issues at play here.

**Catherine Schaefer (16:16):**

It sounds like false information is a big problem. So what do you think that health departments can do to address that false information and those misconceptions?

**Matthew Rivas-Koehl (16:25):**

Yeah, I'll say that this is one thing that I feel very passionate about because as I reflect on being a young person, some of the myths and misconceptions that I carried are interesting to think about now that I do this work for a living. But I think to Sam's point, it's really important to develop ways to share that sort of information. So this could be in the form of developing brochures related to STIs and making them specific to young men as we've talked about. And these could be offered to all male visitors to the health department, for example, you could also encourage providers to discuss common misconceptions about STIs during their visits and to make this more approachable for the providers. The health department could kind of put together a script or something that is like a packaged way for providers to go over this information in any visit. Also, thinking about ways that you can create short, attention-grabbing materials that could go on social media or that could be displayed in clinics, and maybe these pieces of information have just one fact at a time. It's really easy to digest and grab. I also think that young men often don't know what to expect when it comes to STI testing, and they might not know what questions to ask either. So thinking about ways that you can kind of help demystify the STI testing

experience, I think is important. So you can provide young men with this information ahead of time. One example I came across that I thought was really cool was the Linn County Public Health Department in Iowa created a video that explains the process and exactly what to expect if you were to go to them to get STI tested. So creating resources and signage that might address common concerns or frequently asked questions could also encourage uptakes and testing rates. You might be able to post a sign that says, "Urine test, no needles, clothes stay on," or something like that. And then thinking about that example of creating a video, if you were to do that, maybe having a QR code on a sign or even on a little business card to hand out that links to that video so that young men know exactly what to expect when they come in to the clinic.

**Catherine Schaefer (18:52):**

And if you have that youth advisory board that you mentioned, it's probably a good idea to run things by them just to make sure that things like the language and the tone and the visuals are something that they can relate to. I can see how a youth advisory board would be really helpful in creating materials like that.

**Matthew Rivas-Koehl (19:08):**

Yeah, I think this is where you could really lean into your youth advisory board to co-create these materials. So like we said early on, the youth know kind of the lingo and the things that they're hearing from their peers. So maybe you could learn from them what are sort of the myths that are going around right now and create a myth and fact resource or like I mentioned earlier, kind of a survey your youth advisory board and ask them, hey, when you think about STIs or sexual health in general, what are some of the questions that come to mind? What are the questions you hear from your peers? And you could create a frequently asked questions document with that information.

**Catherine Schaefer (19:49):**

Yeah, that'd be really useful. So let's say that you want to get young men in the door right away. Do you have any other advice for making testing more accessible?

**Sam Beckwith (19:59):**

Yeah, so similarly to how we mentioned partnering with organizations to help with outreach to young men, you can also work with your partners to take STI

testing to young men and your partners can really be an effective way of taking STI care and making it mobile and reaching them where they might already be. So for example, if you could think about hosting a popup or mobile testing site at a community sporting event like a 5K or like a high school football game at minor league ballparks or other places where young men might be congregating or during orientation week of a local college or university to make sure that everybody is not dealing with any lingering health issues going into the academic year. And really just the idea that if STI testing STI services are intimidating having known partners who are connected with you can reduce that barrier.

**Matthew Rivas-Koehl (20:52):**

I would just add to that point, Sam, that in these spaces, you don't really want to be going out there in white coat clinical gear. Maybe thinking about if you're at a sporting event, what are the colors of the teams that are playing? Can you wear sports jerseys instead of your clinical typical public health department outfit? Or could you provide t-shirts for your staff that make them look a little bit more accessible when you are sort of out in the community trying to reach youth, trying to reach men in these environments?

**Catherine Schaefer (21:29):**

Yeah, that sounds really useful. Do you have any examples of how this has worked for anybody else, any other orgs?

**Sam Beckwith (21:36):**

So there are actually plenty of examples, and here's just a couple. So University of Miami partners with a community lab, and they actually do a monthly walkup STI screening outside their rec center in rural southern Illinois. Southern Seven Health Department has a Wellness on Wheels van and that parks at different locations around the counties that they serve. And they offer chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV tests alongside other preventative health screenings. In Austin, Texas, Austin Community College partners with a local clinic to offer an HIV mobile unit, and they set up at a different one of the community college's campuses every month. So there are numerous examples of people doing this really successfully.

**Catherine Schaefer (22:20):**

That's awesome. That's a lot of great work. Well, we've covered a lot of ground

today. Thanks so much for your input. Do you have any parting thoughts?

**Matthew Rivas-Koehl (22:30):**

Yeah, thanks again for having us, Catherine. I think this is such an important topic to talk about. I guess just to sort of recap, I think some of the best strategies that we've talked about for engaging men today are really those that center them in the messaging and outreach. So thinking about tailoring, right, tailoring your messaging, tailoring your outreach, and reaching those young men. So I think that one way that you can do this especially well is using the help of a youth advisory board. And to Sam's point, doing what you can to make testing more mobile and accessible, taking testing out in the community. I think clinics and public health department settings can sometimes feel intimidating. So really what we're talking about here are just some creative ways to break down those barriers. And then lastly, I just want to remind that everyone listening to this podcast too, that anybody can get an STI and men play a key part in prevention and treatment. So no matter who you are, even if you're like, no, I'm a sexual health educator, I know all of this information, it's still really important for you to get tested too. It protects your health and that of your partners as well.

**Sam Beckwith (23:47):**

Definitely, Matthew, let's all remember to do our part because nobody is immune to STIs.

**Catherine Schaefer (23:54):**

Alright, thank you so much for your time and thank you for everyone who took the time today to listen to our podcast. Visit our webpage for more information, for tools and for podcasts as part of the New Insights in Sexual Health.

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## Contact

For questions and comments, please reach out to [nish@childtrends.org](mailto:nish@childtrends.org). If you would like to stay updated on new resources, free virtual trainings, and more from our team, [sign up for our newsletter](#).