

¡Soy Unica! ¡Soy Latina!

Using Cultural Pride as a Substance Abuse Prevention Strategy

By Jody K. Vilschick

Closing the Gap, Substance Abuse Prevention: What's Working to Keep Our Youth Drug Free?
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“I am unique! I am Latina!” proclaims the slogan of the ¡Soy Unica! ¡Soy Latina! Campaign, a new substance abuse prevention program for Hispanic girls aged 9 to 14.

Organized by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP), a part of HHS' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), ¡Soy Unica! ¡Soy Latina! emphasizes the strengths inherent in the Hispanic culture in order to help prevent negative behaviors.

“The campaign taps into the pride that exists already in the Hispanic community as a protective factor to prevent substance abuse,” said CSAP director Ruth Sanchez-Way, Ph.D.

The problem, according to campaign organizers at CSAP, is that girls tend to lose self-confidence and self-worth during the pre- and early teenage years. They often become less physically active, perform less well in school, and neglect their own interests and aspirations. During these years, girls are more vulnerable to negative outside influences, and to mixed messages about risky behaviors. In fact, teen pregnancy, depression, and suicide disproportionately affect Hispanic girls during these years.

With rallies around the country and an extensive bilingual web site, the campaign addresses issues of belonging and adaptation, teaches assertiveness and decision-making skills, and provides tips on becoming healthy and successful young adults.

Campaign materials, including posters and activity books, reinforce awareness of the harmful consequences of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use. Designed around the theme of a girl's bedroom, the web site provides detailed information about topics such as self-esteem and cultural pride, communicating effectively, anger management, and depression.

“As a Latina growing up in this country and as a public health professional, I am keenly aware of the special health concerns of my young Latina sisters,” said Dr. Sanchez-Way, at the campaign's first rally. “That's why I am so proud to present these new materials to you.

They send positive, culturally relevant public health messages and proclaim the pride of our heritage—we are unique; we are Latina!”

More than 1,000 Latina girls and their mothers or caregivers gathered for the campaign's first rally on Saturday, April 21, in Mission, Texas. Speakers included Luisa del Carmen Pollard, chairperson of SAMHSA's Hispanic/Latino Initiative, and Norberto Salinas, the mayor of Mission. Performances by mariachi bands, folk dancers, and other entertainers headlined the program. The next rally, co-sponsored by the Dothan-Houston County (Alabama) Substance Abuse Partnership, the Alabama Governor's Office, and the Alabama Cooperative Extension Systems, was held June 9 in Dothan, with other rallies occurring throughout the year across the United States.

The ¡Soy Unica! ¡Soy Latina! campaign is already producing results. One participant wrote on the web site, “I am a young girl who has learned that there are people who can support me wholeheartedly. Thank you, because I learned that my life is worth a lot.”

“It's a huge hit,” said Dr. Sanchez-Way. “The campaign is definitely resonating with the community—they're eager to get their hands on these wonderful materials.”

Designed uniquely for Latinas, the campaign is based on the same objectives as another national public education campaign sponsored by SAMHSA—Girl Power—which also works to increase self-esteem and encourage 9- to 14 year-old girls to make the most of their lives.

¡Soy Unica! ¡Soy Latina! is the second phase of the SAMHSA/CSAP Hispanic/Latino Initiative. Phase I was the Hablemos en Confianza (Let's Talk Openly) campaign, which was launched in October 1999, and focused on Hispanic youth and the development of culturally appropriate substance abuse prevention education curricula and materials.

For more information about the ¡Soy Unica!, ¡Soy Latina! Campaign, go to <http://www.soyunica.org> or call (800) 773-8546. ❖

