Prevention of Substance Abuse Among Adolescents
By Meaghan Long

Over the past twenty five years the use and abuse of illicit substances has been steadily increasing. The majority of that drug use has occurred among American youth. The 1960's began an era of experimentation. Unfortunately tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs has become a sort of right of passage for many American teenagers. Concerns about alcohol and drug abuse have been present in our society for decades (Botvin 1).

Prevention has been the key concern. Most prevention efforts that have been developed over the years have focused on children in the school system. For the most part as the programs have developed they have focused on children in grades six and above (Gilksman 115). Schools are by far the most effective site for substance abuse programs.

Although some of these programs have been and continue to be ineffective, there are many instances where they actually have been successful. Carefully scrutinizing the programs that have been successful is the key to increasing effectiveness (Fors 172).

Alcohol and drug abuse prevention programs should be treated as a way to create a bridge between a school and its community, much more than just another academic class. Society today requires schools to contribute to the physical, social, emotional, moral, and intellectual development of young people (Fors 162). Therefore substance abuse prevention is of extreme importance. School is the only place that all young people are required to spend time on a regular basis. Therefore it is the only place guaranteed to allow for the time necessary to be effective. Schools are by far the most effective place to educate on the topic of substance abuse. This is simply because it is easier to develop programs and implement them at school because students are a captive audience (Sliksman 115). Studies show that although students may not be receptive to all of the information and activities provided in this setting, they do not "tune-out" school based prevention programs (Milgram 184). Many times there is separation between school and community. A major concern of all community members is the safety and well-being of all members. Involving parents and other community members in creating a more informed group of young people is one way to close the gap.

At times it seems as though the history of school based substance abuse programs has not been a positive one. This is simply because of the large number of teenagers that abuse alcohol and other drugs every day. It
seems as though what is being taught to students does not have an impact on their decision making when it comes to the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol. "Society seems at present too often ill-informed or misinformed of many of the facts regarding the effects of alcohol and drugs" (Edwards viii). It is imperative that we take the time now to create a more informed society for tomorrow. Some believe that any positive effects from these programs have been with respect to changes in knowledge not in changes in behavior. "Most of the existing programs that are in place to educate students assume that knowledge gain will be helpful in changing behavior and thoughts, an assumption that can not be made justifiably with any degree of certainty" (Sliksman 180). It is extremely important that programs do not teach students simply about drugs and alcohol, which most do, but more importantly about real life situations and how to make informed decisions.

A number of well designed studies have discovered that prevention programs with community involvement have succeeded in reducing drug use in adolescents (Cuijpers 1). For example, a study conducted by the Transportation Research Institute of Michigan examined the effects on subsequent driving of a high school-based alcohol prevention program. The study included a control group and an intervention group with a total of 4,385 tenth grade students. The group of students in the intervention program inevitably showed a significant decrease in the number of driving offenses after having taken the class. The findings suggest that a high school based alcohol prevention program can positively affect responsible driving. The results indicate the extreme need to start prevention programs at a young age and extend them beyond the initial exposure to driving (Shope 1). Programs that do not begin until tenth grade, when most students are beginning to drive, lose much of their effectiveness due to the late start. A program of this nature makes students more aware not only of the affects that drinking has on themselves, but also on their surrounding community. In turn this creates a safer community.

Another example to represent the importance of creating a bridge between community and school based substance abuse prevention is a study conducted by Weill Medical College of Cornell University. This study examined the effectiveness of intervention programs at the middle school level. Rates of binge drinking were compared among youth who received a substance abuse prevention program at the beginning of seventh grade (1,713 students) and a control group (1,328 students) that did not. The proportion of binge drinkers was over 50% lower in the intervention group compared to the control group in the follow-up assessments. These findings indicate that school based drug abuse prevention programs
significantly reduce binge drinking in middle school students (Botvin 1). This is yet another example of an effective program that had heavy involvement from parents and other community members. Many programs have been examined and dismissed as unsuccessful. There are multiple reasons why this may be the case. First of all, the goals of a specific program may have been unclear so that making an outcome assessment was difficult (Milgram 185). Also, the content of the program may not meet the student's needs. If the program is designed for young students and it is taught at a high school level, its effectiveness will decrease and vice versa. Thirdly, the material covered in substance abuse prevention programs is difficult to teach. The teacher delivering the program may not be comfortable teaching the material or may not be trained in this specific area of knowledge. Lastly, many times programs may not have a long enough duration to be as effective as possible (Sliksman 179). Many times a school system limits the substance abuse education to one level or one specific period of time. An example of this would be an education program that is taught solely at the high school level, or a program that begins and ends around prom and graduation time. These programs can not be assessed accurately because of their lack of comprehensiveness. It is important to reinforce the magnitude of the dangers of alcohol and drug use at these specific times, but it is more important to have an extensive program being presented to students at all times. A curriculum that runs from kindergarten to twelfth grade with a number of courses would be the most ideal. Involving community parents to help in reinforcing the dangers of drug use would also be very effective for students at a very young age. This curriculum would incorporate teaching strategies for early identification, which will undoubtedly help those beginning to be at high risk. It would also continually strengthen health habits and answer questions throughout student's pre-teen and teenage years (Sliksman 181).

Most young children may not have an explicit understanding of illegal substances and their effect on people. Although, it would be completely naive to believe that children do not know of these things. The children at high risk for substance abuse are the ones who will benefit from the education at a very young age. Some may argue that it is dangerous to expose children to much of this information, but by giving children a language for it the ones at the highest risk for exposure, willieam the dangers. An elementary school social skills and peer pressure resistance curriculum for preventing alcohol misuse was developed, implemented, and evaluated by the Department of Post Graduate Medicine and Health Professions Education at the University of Michigan Medical School. Results indicated the intervention was effective in reducing the number
of students who experimented with alcohol (Dielman 1). Involving parents in the education of young people helps teachers and the many other educators involved in prevention programs recognize the appropriate boundaries and limitations regarding how detailed programs should be in relation to the age of the students.

Peer leadership is an extremely effective way to teach about drug abuse and ways it can be prevented (Klepp 1). The classroom provides a site where this is possible. "The classroom is a peer group" says Milgram, Adolescent Psychologist (185). It is essential that students interact with each other to discuss individual beliefs about and encounters with drugs and alcohol and to discuss reasonable positive alternatives in high risk situations. Having strong community based programs creates an environment where older students can help to teach younger students. Studies show that targeting middle school aged children and designing programs that can be primarily be delivered by peer leaders will drastically increase the effectiveness of school based substance use prevention programs (Gottfredson 1). Although parents and older community members many times may not be considered peers, they can use personal experiences to advance students knowledge. The participation of these community members is a critical component in school based education.

School is by far the finest place for prevention education. It is imperative that this specialized type of education is not simply treated as another academic, but more an interactive class where students have the opportunity to gain a connection with their community. The most effective programs have included a secure community base. To ensure many more positive outcomes when it comes to prevention programs, it is extremely important to interconnect community with-in school-based programs. "Building a bridge between the community and the school helps to reinforce the importance of this type of education" Milgram 184). Community support is fundamental in any program's success.

**Works Cited**


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