Curbing Youth Substance Use: What Actually Works?

Despite some leveling off in the last decade, youths continue to use substances—including alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana—at alarmingly high rates. And the consequences of such substance use are sobering. Smoking cigarettes is the leading cause of preventable death, and once youth begin smoking, they are very likely to become regular smokers. When youth use alcohol and marijuana, they are more likely to be involved in traffic accidents and deaths, exercise poor judgment, try unsafe sexual practices, and partake in other forms of risky behavior. Adolescent substance use also predicts school failure, violence, and emotional distress.

Turning the tide against youth substance abuse is not easy but is also not impossible. Pioneering work by RAND researchers begun in the 1980s has shown that classroom drug prevention programs can help—even for high-risk youth.

Not All Drug Prevention Programs Are Created Equal

While all drug prevention programs aim to prevent drug use, not all are effective. One of the most successful programs is the RAND-developed Project ALERT, a drug prevention program for middle-school students that has been recognized as one of a handful of exemplary programs by the Department of Education and as a model program by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

Project ALERT motivates students against using drugs and gives them the skills to translate that motivation into effective resistance behavior, an approach that is widely viewed as state-of-the-art in drug use prevention. Following an initial evaluation that demonstrated its effectiveness but also showed some limitations, RAND researchers revised the program to make it better and tested it in a large, randomized clinical trial for 18 months in 55 South Dakota middle schools. Those tests showed improvements over the initial program: Beyond curbing cigarette and marijuana use, it also prevented alcohol misuse.

Dealing with Talking Lizards and Singing Ferrets

For cigarettes, we had Joe Camel, and now animated lizards and ferrets are used to sell beer. Do youth pay attention to and remember these ads? RAND research that looked at 4th- and 9th-graders found that they do. Thirty percent of 4th-graders and 75 percent of 9th-graders could name the brand of beer advertised with talking animals.

Another RAND study that followed 7th-graders for two years showed that alcohol advertising fosters drinking in high school. This study looked at all kinds of ads. The location of ads made a difference. In particular, adolescents who had not tried alcohol at age 13 were more influenced by advertising displays in grocery/convenience stores, while those who had already tried alcohol were more likely to be influenced by magazine ads or by concession-stand advertising at sports or music events. TV ads weren’t as influential as expected, but the overall effect of advertising from all sources was an

INTERVIEW

Opportunities and Challenges in the Youth Drug Prevention Field

As a Senior Behavioral/Social Scientist at the RAND Corporation, Dr. Phyllis Ellickson is co-director of the Center for Research on Child and Adolescent Health. She led the team that developed and evaluated Project ALERT, an exemplary prevention program that has been disseminated throughout the United States. She has also published extensively on the patterns, antecedents, and consequences of adolescent and young adult drug use; violence HIV risk, smoking behavior, and dropping out; the links between alcohol advertising and youth drinking; and the challenges of conducting large-scale field trials and field experiments.

What are some of the positive changes you’ve seen in the youth drug prevention field?

Back in 1998, the Department of Education promulgated the principles of effectiveness for drug prevention, which put pressure on schools to use empirically tested, proven programs, like Project ALERT. That incentive, which is linked to the funds available under the Safe & Drug-Free Schools and Communities (SDFSC) Act, has made an enormous difference in what schools have been choosing for their students. More and more schools have adopted evidence-based programs over the past seven or eight years.

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How do you see this trend playing out in the future?
Unfortunately, because 50 percent of SDFSC funding can now be diverted to nonprevention activities, funding for prevention has been shrinking fast over the past two years. As a result, schools are finding it increasingly difficult to find the resources and time to do prevention. Coupled with mounting pressure for better performance, greater accountability, and testing in schools, prevention can be, and often is, viewed as detracting from schools’ primary educational goals—even though many studies have linked drug use with poor educational outcomes.

Happily, the funding for drug prevention has not been completely cut. But the pressure to decrease or even eliminate it has not faded, and many communities fear their prevention programs may wither away.

Aside from funding challenges, what other challenges are there?
Maintaining the effectiveness of programs like Project ALERT as they become disseminated nationwide is crucial. Most experts agree that one key is ensuring that good programs are delivered in a way that adheres to the original content and teaching process. But time and other pressures often lead teachers to drop a lesson here or an activity there; pretty soon, the program that students receive is very different from the one originally found to be effective.

What can program disseminators do to address this challenge?
They can provide supports that enhance the likelihood of effective implementation, such as training, easy-to-use materials, and technical assistance. For example, the Best Foundation, which provides Project ALERT to schools, requires that teachers who use the program get training (and they offer that training, as well as the curriculum, at well below cost).

Any other challenges?
Building institutional commitment is another key to sustaining effective programs over time. And that typically requires having a program champion at the district or school level, someone who takes responsibility each year for ensuring the curriculum is delivered, new teachers are trained, and class time is set aside for the lessons. Disseminators can work with districts to identify and support such champions, but they cannot conjure them up by themselves.

The Promising Practices Network (PPN) is a user-friendly website operated by RAND that provides evidence-based information on child, youth, and family policy. The site includes research about programs and practices that help prevent youth substance use, as well as information related to effective service delivery.

Visit the Promising Practices Network:
http://www.promisingpractices.net/

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increased likelihood of drinking.
One obvious solution is to limit youth exposure to such ads, but given the variety of venues, doing so is a tall order. Another approach is to teach kids how to recognize what advertisers are trying to get them to believe and how to counter them. Project ALERT Plus, a version of ALERT that includes 9th-grade lessons, does this by having kids rewrite ads to tell the “real truth” about alcohol and by sensitizing them to how advertisers use different marketing strategies to target specific groups. And it has proven effective. Youth exposed to Project ALERT Plus were less likely to drink in ninth grade and were less susceptible to the persuasive appeals of in-store advertisements.

Leveraging the Effect of Anti-Drug Media Campaigns
If the media can promote substance use, it stands to reason that the media can be used to discourage such use. One of the largest of such efforts is the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign, but a large-scale, multi-year evaluation of the Campaign showed that while it raised exposure to anti-drug media messages, it had so far failed to diminish marijuana use.

But what happens when such campaigns take place in concert with school-based programs? The fortuitous timing of the Campaign’s full implementation phase and a 9th-grade trial of Project ALERT Plus allowed RAND to begin to answer that question. And the results were promising. Marijuana use in the past month was significantly less likely among ALERT Plus groups. And it has proven effective. Youth who use the program get training (and they offer that training, as well as the curriculum, at well below cost).

The Need to Ramp Up
While programs like Project ALERT have proven to be successful in middle and junior high schools—with both high- and low-risk adolescents—up to now, only about one-third of the nation’s public schools and one-eighth of the its private schools have incorporated them into their curricula. The growing body of empirical evidence provides strong support for instituting universalistic prevention programs in middle schools.