



Engaging Families in Effective Substance Abuse Prevention

reSource

Join FCD for the last in a three-part webinar series on social norms.

[Click here](#) for more information and to register for the session on February 25.

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Schools and Families Together

Effective prevention approaches bring the entire community together - including students and their families.

When FCD works with a school - to deliver intensive student education seminars, to train faculty or to consult with a prevention planning team - this important effort is just one piece of a more **comprehensive** substance abuse prevention approach. Our guidance and training are meant to empower school communities to continue their own prevention conversations, plans and successes into the future. We especially hope that our work will engage your community's families in the reinforcement of key prevention strategies. This is our hope, because at FCD we know that children whose parents talk to them about the risks of alcohol and other drug use are much less likely to get into trouble with substances.

Parents and Prevention - What We Know

Parents and families make all the difference when it comes to keeping kids safe from substance abuse.

Research shows that many students do not drink alcohol or use other drugs because they do not want to disappoint their parents. The positive influence of strong parental support in making healthy decisions has been long stated by research. **The Partnership at Drugfree.org** contends that when children are taught the risks of substance use by their parents, these young people are up to half less likely to experience problems with addiction later in life.

In our **FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey**, we ask students about the role of parental monitoring, supervision and support in their daily lives. What we consistently find is that students whose parents are most invested and who set the clearest family rules are the students making the healthiest choices about substance use.

We also know from our surveys that parents have much more influence on their children's decision to use or not use than they may think. When we ask students, "Whose opinion matters the most to you when you make decisions about alcohol and other drug use?" we find that students unanimously declare their parents' opinions more important than those of teachers, coaches, older students or peers. In some school communities, kids tell us that what their parents have to say matters more to them than even their own opinions, especially during the middle school years and as they transition to high school.

What we know about parents' and families' influence on keeping kids healthy is clear - schools need parents as prevention

partners. So what might be getting in the way of engaging families in your school's substance abuse prevention efforts, and how can that change?

A Parent's Worry: Does Everyone Really Do It?

Changing normative beliefs and social norms is an important piece of effective prevention. The social norms approach to prevention is based on the fact that students consistently and dramatically overestimate alcohol and other drug use by their peers and elders. At the same time, they underestimate healthy behaviors, such as the non-use of substances. The trouble is, when students believe there is a high level of use within their peer groups, this alone can drive increases in use. By contrast, use is less prevalent in communities where non-use is held as the norm and students are recognized and respected for their healthy choices.

In order to begin to change substance use norms in a culture where students may think "everyone is doing it," it is important to question where unhealthy beliefs come from in the first place. Many times students hear stories about a small group of their peers who have made unhealthy choices with regard to substance use. When kids repeatedly hear such stories, teenage use begins to seem like a normal occurrence in their community, and the related consequences of use might start to become normalized. As more people talk, stories grow and become exaggerated. Pretty soon the majority of students, who make consistently healthy choices about alcohol and other drugs, start to feel abnormal for abstaining from use, and internal pressure to fit into what they think is the norm begins to mount.

Families, and especially parents, can intervene to correct false, unhealthy perceptions of use and to point out the healthy behaviors of so many students. Families that understand the social norms approach will be able to question and challenge - in a supportive manner - their children's generalizations and overestimations of their peers' higher-risk behavior.

A first step in engaging families in social norms-based prevention is to ensure that parents are not fueling false and unhealthy normative beliefs! How many times have we heard an adult say, "All kids are going to experiment with alcohol"? The truth is that most students don't use regularly and don't think it's cool to get drunk. In fact, many hold the personal opinion that drinking is never a good thing for teenagers to do. Quite often, our young people who make healthy decisions become an unsupported majority, choosing healthy behaviors even as the adults in their lives expect less of them. The family

role in preventing student use starts when parents, older siblings and the extended family all help young people feel confident, proud and celebrated for making healthy choices.

Families and Free Time: It's Just a Movie

Teens' perceptions about what is normal and acceptable behavior are derived from a few primary sources: parents, peers and media.

Increasingly, families are challenged to win the attention of young people from formidable adversaries like smart phones, tablets and social media platforms. Technology provides students access to music, movies, television and other media at their fingertips.

Technology is beneficial when it connects kids to relatives living in another country, as a hub for research and learning and often as a place for healthy recreation, too. However, in the midst of all the apps, a variety of media content can normalize teen alcohol and other drug use, minimize the associated risks and glorify attitudes about using substances. The Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine found that, even before the advent of tablet technology, for every hour of music teenagers listened to, they were exposed to 35 references about substance abuse.

In general, exposure to potentially "pro" substance abuse messages from our society far outweighs the amount of discussion families are having about prevention. This is why it's so important for families to have lively conversations about media with their children. Technology isn't going anywhere, but we can help families deconstruct the media influences in their children's lives. Children should understand that movies, music and television are not a true depiction of an often much healthier reality.

Young people should be challenged to think critically about the messages they receive. This can begin at home, when downloading a new song, playing a video game or watching a popular TV show as a family. FCD recommends identifying teachable moments within media use. Parents can let their teens turn up the radio, or sit down with them to watch the latest comedy, if only to check in with their students about the feelings, perspectives and attitudes they have about media's portrayal of substance use. If a child's response is something like, "That's just normal teenage stuff; everyone gets high," then a bonding moment can turn into a teachable moment where family members remind one another that most kids actually don't use alcohol or other drugs.

What Else Can Parents and Families Do?

What are some of the most effective strategies that parents can use to help lower the risk of substance abuse for their children? How can schools support these strategies? We at FCD believe there are many additional actions that parents can take to make a significant difference in lowering risk of teen use, abuse and addiction.

Here are a few key suggestions:

1. Encourage children and adolescents to become and stay involved in activities
2. Communicate with the school and other parents, and,
3. Possibly most importantly, communicate with their children.

Studies have consistently shown that children who are involved in co- and extra-curricular activities are less likely to use substances. Students can be engaged in school, community, charity, scouting or religious groups and activities, depending on their interests, skills and passions. Not only do these activities take up otherwise idle or unsupervised time in an adolescent's schedule, but participation can also encourage a strengthened sense of identity, community, and direction within a student - all reasons not to use substances. Fitting regular activities into children's schedules also makes it that much easier for parents to monitor their children's time.

Basic parent and family prevention education is also key. One of the most common risk factors for adolescent substance use is a lack of parental knowledge about alcohol and other drug risks, coupled with parental denial about what may be going on in the lives of their children. It can be very difficult to know that a child is using substances if one is not aware of the signs and symptoms of use. Schools can play a significant role in providing parents and families with accurate, relevant information about the prevention of alcohol and other drug abuse in students. Parent networks can be built through school-based newsletters, online forums and parent workshops on this important topic.

Parent-to-parent communication outside of the school is also an effective way to monitor the behavior of teens in a community. Schools can encourage parents to share phone numbers with one another, to get to know the adults raising their kids' best friends and to always check in with a parent hosting a student party before their child's attendance at the event. These are basic steps that can keep healthy kids healthy, and the support of a school community can help parents

perform these steps on a regular basis.

Establishing and maintaining active and ongoing communication with children about substance abuse prevention is a critical piece of a family's prevention efforts. Many parents assume their children know how they feel about substance use, but during the teenage years, clear and consistent communication about family rules and expectations is crucial.

Schools can challenge parents to ask themselves questions like:

- Is it acceptable in our family for our teenage children ever to use alcohol? To become intoxicated?
- If no, what are our family consequences for use, and how will we, as adults, consistently enforce those consequences?
- If yes, what are our exact parameters for use as a family? If our children go outside of those parameters, what are our family consequences, and how will we, as adults, consistently enforce those consequences?

These nuances in a family's expectations may not be clear to a teen. This is why it is so important for schools to encourage families to reflect on these questions and to communicate their honest expectations to their teens clearly, consistently and frequently, with love and care. Listening to children to learn how they feel and think about substance use is also very important.

How Can Schools Keep Supporting Families?

Prevention efforts that combine family- and school-based initiatives can be more effective than one group's efforts in isolation of the other. Schools and parents working in tandem can exert more influence than when they work alone, or at cross purposes. So what other practical steps can schools take to provide support to parents?

Prevention Education

First: teach them! If parents have knowledge about alcohol and other drugs, how they affect teens and how to spot use and abuse, they will be able to make more effective, educated decisions within their homes. Schools can also give parents information about where to go and who to talk to if they believe their child is using substances. **Parent education** sessions like the ones that FCD provide are a great step forward in this process.

Leading through Policies

Schools can be very effective at explaining the value of and training parents to practice effective rule-setting and activity-monitoring techniques. Nearly every school provides families with a handbook of school rules, expectations and consequences clearly stated. Schools can guide parents to understand the value of this communication technique and how to implement it in their own lives. In many cases, teaching the value of and methods for employing consistent discipline can be taught as well.

Championing the Social Norms Approach

Schools can also spearhead a community's investment in the evidence-based social norms approach to substance abuse prevention in ways that individual families cannot. Initiating social norms discussions among parents in your community can aid in the understanding and application of healthy norms information at home.

Supporting Families Who Make Healthy Choices

For schools committed to student substance abuse prevention on campus, supporting families who are equally committed to prevention is a prime responsibility. Some schools offer parents safe homes pledges for this purpose and many others support families by delivering school-based prevention resources that go far above the academic call of duty. Such support may include the development of rich arrays of alcohol-and-other-drug-free student events and activities, or the sponsoring of student non-use peer leadership groups. When parents know their non-using students have rewarding opportunities to be themselves at school and have safe places off campus to enjoy their friends, they can feel supported by the school in their prevention efforts at home.

Moving Ahead Together

Substance abuse seriously affects the health of students, families and communities. Although we often ask ourselves what we each can do as individuals to help prevent student substance abuse, a more powerful question to ask is what we all can do together. FCD believes that schools and families working collaboratively can exert the greatest positive impact on the health of our children.

Authors

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