

Title:

Drug Prevention Programs Can Work: Research Findings

Source:

Tobler, Nancy S. Drug Prevention Programs Can Work: Research Findings. *Journal of Addictive Diseases* 11(3) 1992: 1-28.

Web and Email Addresses:

The New York State Division of Substance Abuse Services web site is at

<http://www.oasas.state.ny.us/pio/prevent.htm> .

This study was funded by the New York State Division of Substance Abuse Services. The New York State Division of Substance Abuse Services can be reached by email at webmaster@oasas.state.ny.us The phone number for their office is (518) 485-2132.

Conclusion:

The results of this study show the impact of five different types of prevention strategies on drug using behavior. Prevention programs that are incorporated into the "peer" category are shown to have the most impact on the drug using behaviors of participants. It is important to note that peer programs are not always peer led, but are characterized as peer programs by their inclusion of two important components. Peer programs provide accurate information on the short and long term consequences of drug use and promote the development of a positive peer group atmosphere. This atmosphere is crucial in creating support for the non-use of drugs. It challenges the attitude that experimenting/using drugs are a normative behavior. The results of the research showed that peer programs with mental health professionals or counselors as the facilitator showed the greatest behavioral impact. However, peer leaders and teachers can also be effective leaders. All programs that had a positive impact on drug using behavior used trained facilitators in implementation.

Although not as thoroughly reviewed, programs that fell into the alternative category also showed a positive behavioral change. These programs were often targeted to youth especially at risk for drug use. The alternative programs were more individualized and focused on the development of life skills. Mental health professionals or counselors most often facilitated alternative programs. Participants in the alternative type of programs showed an increase in skills as well as a decrease in observed drug using behavior.

The programs that showed a positive behavioral impact incorporated developmentally appropriate approaches and activities. Programs geared toward middle school aged students focused on the development of refusal and other interpersonal skills. While successful programs for high school aged students focused on enhancing and building personal relationships.

Programs that were categorized as knowledge only (such as "scare tactics") did not show a significant impact on the drug-using behavior of participants. Affective programs that are categorized by very little drug information, but rather focus on the intrapersonal skills of the participants showed the least amount of impact on behaviors. When the two approaches are combined into a knowledge plus affective category only a very small impact on behavior was achieved.

Purpose:

This study attempts to determine the components of adolescent prevention programs that are successful in impacting drug-using behavior. The author previously conducted a study of 143 separate but related prevention programs. The author used this prior meta-analysis to distinguish the types of prevention programs having an impact on adolescent drug-using behaviors. For the current research the author reviews 91 of the original 143 prevention programs. The 91 programs used for the current review all included "drug use measures" that demonstrated the impact of the program on the prevention or reduction of drug using behaviors.

The results of the current research are based solely on the outcomes related to drug using behaviors. The most distinctive difference in this study from the previous work is that only one effect size or standardized difference between the experimental and control group means was used for each program. The effect size for the outcomes related to either self reported or observed drug using behavior was calculated for each program. All programs were placed into five categories related to the prevention strategy the program employs. The current research compares the results of programs in the five categories and examines the differences in the strategies along with issues related to adolescent development that may be impacting program success.

In order to establish which types of programs should be offered to whom and at what age, a thorough search from published and unpublished reports (i.e., ERIC documents and agencies reports); public and private efforts; and national, state and local sponsorships would have to be reviewed. Both failed and successful studies were also included.

Findings:

The study compared five categories of prevention strategies:

- Knowledge Only
These programs include information only such as the "scare tactics" that were employed during the early years of prevention research. These programs showed no impact in drug using behavior
- Affective Only
These programs provide very little information about drugs or drug use and focus on intrapersonal change of the participants. The evaluations for affective only programs showed the least amount of impact on drug using behaviors.
- Knowledge Plus Affective
This strategy is the combination of the above two approaches. When combined the strategies still only showed a very small impact on drug use.
- Alternative
These programs were offered to youth at-risk for substance abuse. The programs are more individualized and focused on the development of life skills. The results of these program evaluations showed that participants reported an increase in skill as well as a decrease in observed drug using behavior.
- Peer Program
Peer programs have a dual purpose, to provide factual information regarding the short and long term outcomes of drug use as well as develop a positive peer group

atmosphere that supports healthy choices. Peer group programs showed the most impact on drug using behavior.

The article concentrated on peer programs because peer programs were found to have the highest effect when compared to other strategies. The article showed that knowledge-only programs and affective-only programs continued to show poor results in reducing adolescent drug use. The knowledge-plus-affective strategy had more success, but the effect was minimal. The programs using alternatives strategy showed positive results, but were primarily offered to “at risk” youth.

The article examined factors that made peer programs successful. Implementation problems were associated with less effective peer programs. The delivery method by a successful leader was found to impact the success of the peer program. The most successful leaders were mental health professionals because they were believed to be skilled facilitators who could come into a classroom without being associated with the daily classroom issues. Teachers were effective with peer groups in middle school grades. Peer leaders with training were more effective leaders than teachers were.

Implications for Prevention:

The research presented in the article most clearly gives credibility and support for the category of peer program prevention. It is important to realize, however, that peer programs are not necessarily peer led, but categorized by the development of a positive peer group atmosphere along with information regarding short and long term consequences of drug use. The most effective peer programs incorporate developmentally appropriate teaching strategies. The research clearly indicates specific strategies that are effective during the middle school years. According to the results of the study, students in grades six through eight should be exposed to prevention programs that address normative use and utilizing the resistance skill or broadening the approach to incorporate additional social skills.

The findings related to program facilitation are also important to prevention work. A running theme in all of the successful programs is the incorporation of facilitator training. In order to have positive behavioral outcomes the facilitator must have the skills necessary to create an environment conducive to the development of a positive peer group.

A successful school based program could be effective if the community supports the principles presented by the programs. Many comprehensive community based programs are showing successful results, particularly in maintaining the initial gains made by the school based programs. In order to maintain those gains, the community programs must be funded at a level that provides for a long term evaluation to determine if adolescent drug use is decreased.

Summary Provided By:

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