

Booster Lessons Reinforce Effectiveness

“Prevention is an ongoing process; one-shot programs simply aren’t enough,” observes Phyllis Ellickson, Ph.D., a senior behavioral scientist at RAND and project director for the research and design of Project ALERT. “As kids mature, they acquire new friends and ways of perceiving the world, changes that mean they need continued reinforcement for resisting drugs.” That’s why the Project ALERT booster lessons delivered in year two of the program are critical to continuing the results of the core curriculum.

According to RAND research, the three booster lessons convert positive trends gained from the initial eleven lessons into statistically significant changes. Gains, such as the curbing of current and regular smoking, are strongly enhanced. The prevention of pot initiation and diminishment of current use are also maintained. If teachers neglect these three booster lessons, the positive results of the core curriculum will erode.

Boosters Strengthen Earlier Lessons

The 45-minute booster lessons, delivered over three consecutive weeks, reinforce material learned the previous year. As in the core curriculum, the booster lessons support two main goals:

- to motivate resistance to drugs; and,
- to practice resisting internal and external pressures to use drugs.

While the core and booster lessons share identical goals, new audio visual materials, handouts and activities keep the material fresh. The videos – “*Paul’s Fix*” and “*Resisting Peer Pressure: Teenagers Speak Out*” – serve as catalysts for student skits and discussions.

In addition to a review of the gateway drugs covered in the core curriculum, booster lessons caution students about potential next-stage drugs like cocaine and hallucinogens. “By eighth grade, students may start hearing about or feeling pressure to use these harder drugs,” explains Louise Miller, RAND curriculum specialist and Project ALERT trainer.

For the past four years, CASA, The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, has conducted a Back-to-School survey of teens, teachers and principals to examine attitudes on substance abuse.

This year’s survey reveals for the first time how dramatically the world changes when an American 12-year-old turns 13. The report’s findings are quite clear that in no other year does a child’s access to drugs, and attitude about drugs, shift so abruptly.

Specifically, the report finds that:

- A 13-year-old is almost three times likelier to know a teen who uses acid, cocaine or heroin than a 12-year-old is.
- A 13-year-old is more than three times likelier to be able to buy pot, and to buy acid, cocaine or heroin. He/she is almost three times likelier to know a student drug seller and more than three times likelier to be unwilling to report a student using drugs.
- A 13-year-old is far less likely to be afraid of getting caught using illegal drugs, to rely on parents rather than friends in making important decisions, to find an adult home after school and to tell parents where they go after school.

For teachers who wish to discuss drugs prevalent in their own region, data can be accessed through The National Clearinghouse on Drug and Alcohol Information, state health departments, or surveys conducted by local school districts.

The interactive booster lessons address the students' greater maturity, exposure to new situations and potential for more pressure. The lessons start out by asking kids to talk about how they are different this year and how pressures may have increased. Skits, such as internal pressure scenarios, reflect how their "self-talk" may have changed between seventh and eighth grades.

"Interactivity really is a fail-safe plan to ensure the curriculum meets kids where they are in time, maturity and experience," notes Ellickson. "You are always building on what the students bring to the classroom."

New activities add an extra dimension to the previous learning experience. For instance, Booster Lesson 3 asks students to discuss how friends can help each other say "no." "We felt kids giving positive reinforcement to each other strengthened the whole process of learning resistance skills," explains Ellickson.

"Research shows that kids who start using drugs before age 15 are much more likely to become heavy users - and to have lots of other problems," states Ellickson. "If all we do is delay initiation, or the transition from experimenting to regular use, we will have accomplished a lot."