

You Don't Have To Be A Drug Expert To Be A Great Project ALERT Teacher

Information-only curricula have been shown to be ineffective, but clearly, some drug information is necessary and useful. We recently posed the following questions to Louise Miller, one of Project ALERT's original authors.

When does providing drug information significantly contribute to substance abuse prevention efforts?

"If it is functional information, it can help in decision-making," says Miller.

"Functional information informs the decision-making process. For example, knowing that there are serious consequences to smoking marijuana even once can influence a student's decision not to experiment. Smoking a single marijuana joint can lead to unsafe driving, trouble with parents, embarrassing oneself in front of friends, poor communication skills or loss of control. By understanding this, students are armed with good reasons they can use when telling a friend why they don't want to try smoking a joint."

"These realistic consequences are dramatized in the Lesson 2 video '*Pot: The Party Crasher*.' Time is also provided within this lesson to discuss how marijuana affects the mind, the impact of short-term use, long-term use and dependence."

Are there any downsides to providing drug information?

There can be downsides in a classroom situation. Miller cautions that teachers should think carefully about providing additional drug information in the following instances:

1. If the information in any way glorifies use.

For example, some teachers use stories to exemplify the negative consequences of using without realizing that inadvertently the user in the story appeals to the students.

2. If the information is irrelevant to the decision-making process.

Examples include the chemical composition of various drugs or lengthy discussions about long-term consequences. If you are also teaching chemistry or some other related subject unit and are specifically trying to achieve an integrated learning goal, this information on chemical composition may be appropriate. But, it's not necessary to achieve the ultimate goal of Project ALERT to prevent students from using drugs.

3. If it requires the elimination of Project ALERT activities.

When time is limited, a lengthy discussion of drug information will almost certainly require that you eliminate or reduce other activities in the prescribed Project ALERT lessons. The emphasis needs to be on resistance skill-building, modeling, practice and reinforcement. The prescribed activities are ones that we know work towards the goal of preventing drug use. They should not be eliminated if the curriculum is going to be effective.

If you can devote more time than required by the 11 lessons in the core year or the 3 lessons in the booster year, should you supplement with additional factual information on drugs? Or, should you seek out other types of activities?

Miller responds, "I think factual information is best used within the context of resistance-skill development. For example, the information on inhalants in Lesson 8 is used in an activity that asks students to give reasons to a friend why they shouldn't try inhalants.

When teachers are making the decision whether or not to include more information, they should ask themselves, 'How will students use this information? Will it help them make decisions not to use drugs?' Again, some drug information may be interesting but may not enhance drug prevention efforts."

"If there is additional time that can be devoted to substance abuse prevention, perhaps an extra period or even several, you might think first about extending Lesson 9, Review and Practice of Resistance Techniques, into a second period. Find out more from your students about what other kind of pressure situations they experience - and then practice, practice, practice responding to these situations."

"Visit your regional resource center and explore ways students can become more active in your own community to counter the advertising and promotion of alcohol and tobacco. For example, students can record the numbers and kinds of advertising promotions they see during the course of a single week and then write letters to area retailers, billboard companies and local government agencies to express their concern."

Hint: Good web sites for youth activism projects are:

Kickbutt	www.kickbutt.com
Florida Kids Campaign Against Tobacco	http://team.state.fl.us/
Smokescreen Action Network	www.smokescreen.org
Stop Teenage Addiction to Tobacco	www.stat.org

Project ALERT staff is here for you. You do not have to be a drug expert to be a great Project ALERT teacher. The most effective Project ALERT teachers are those who understand and implement the eight teaching strategies and teach all of the lessons without skipping any of the prescribed activities.

But, what should you do if a student genuinely has a technical question about drugs and you don't know how to answer it?

Tell the student you will work with them to find the information. There are many excellent sources to help you. On the Project ALERT website you will find links to ATOD websites that will quickly answer most questions. If you can't find what you are looking for, call us at 800 ALERT-10 and we will join you in your search.

Think about what a student may really be asking. Keep in mind that the student may have asked the question because of concerns he or she has about themselves or somebody they care about. If you suspect that this is the case, approach the student discreetly and ask if the student would like some confidential help. *“Would you like to talk to someone? Someone you can trust?”* If there is receptivity, refer them to a trained counselor within the school system. You could offer to accompany the student to arrange a meeting. *“Would you like to meet this person? Her/His name is -- and I'd be happy to go with you to her/his office*