

Prevention Program Curbs Drug Abuse Among Middle-School Youth

Results of a recently published study show that Project ALERT, a widely used school-based drug abuse prevention program, successfully curbs the use of alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana among middle-school students.

Researchers from RAND Health conducted a randomized, controlled study in 55 South Dakota middle schools from 1997 to 1999. More than 4,000 seventh-grade students were assigned to Project ALERT classes or to a control group that was exposed to drug prevention measures already in place at their schools. The analysis assessed drug use 18 months later.

Results showed that Project ALERT lessons significantly reduced the proportion of new cigarette users by 19 percent and new marijuana users by 24 percent. When compared with the control group, marijuana initiation rates were 38 percent lower for ALERT students who had not tried cigarettes or marijuana at the start of the study, and 26 percent lower for higher risk students who had tried cigarettes. Scores reflecting overall alcohol abuse (binge drinking and drinking that led to fights, for example) were 24 percent lower for all ALERT students.

Project ALERT is designed to modify student attitudes and behaviors toward alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana. Students are exposed to 11 lessons in seventh grade and 3 reinforcement or booster lessons in eighth grade. The lessons help students identify and resist prodrug pressures and understand the social, emotional, and physical consequences of using harmful substances.

The original Project ALERT was tested in urban, suburban, and rural schools in Oregon and California. Thus, it has been shown to be effective for students in a variety of communities. The present study shows it also can be used successfully in regions with comparatively high rates of alcohol dependence, binge drinking, and current smoking.

WHAT IT MEANS: Drug prevention programs are critical to school-based antidrug efforts and they can effect behavior change in nonusers and in youth who already smoke and drink.

The study, by lead researcher Phyllis Ellickson and her colleagues, appeared in the November 2003 issue of the American Journal of Public Health.