Key Strategies for Violence and Substance Abuse Prevention III: Working in the Community

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The nature of the community in which youth live – and their relationship to this community – can have a profound effect on whether they become involved in substance abuse and violence. Prevention activities carried out in these communities can help ensure that the community is a positive influence that helps youth resist pressures toward risk behaviors.

This publication describes some key strategies that communities can use to prevent substance abuse and violence among youth. Two companion publications, Key Strategies for Violence and Substance Abuse Prevention I: Working with Children and Families, and Key Strategies for Violence and Substance Abuse Prevention II: Working with the Classroom and the School Environment describe complementary strategies involving children, families, and the school environment.

Note: The numbering of the key strategies described in this prevention brief continues the numbering used in Key Strategies for Violence and Substance Abuse Prevention II: Working with the Classroom and the School Environment.

Key Strategy 9: Community Policies to Limit Availability of Controlled Substances and Weapons

Policies that control the availability of alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and weapons through pricing, deterrence, incentives for not using, and restrictions on availability and use are effective at preventing behaviors associated with these substances and weapons.

- Increasing the price of alcohol or tobacco through excise taxes is associated with effectively reducing consumption (number of times consumed and amount consumed) (Chaloupka and Grossman, 1996). Price increases can also reduce alcohol-related problems, including motor vehicle crashes, driving while intoxicated, rape, robbery, suicide, and cancer death rates.

- Setting the legal blood alcohol content limit to .00 or .02 for people under the age of 21 significantly reduces traffic deaths among young people (Sweedler, 1990; Blomberg, 1993; Hingson, Heeren, and Winter, 1994).

- Restricting the use of tobacco in public places and private workplaces is effective in reducing cigarette sales (Chaloupka, 1992) and tobacco use, because it lowers average daily cigarette consumption among adults and youth (Chaloupka and Saffer, 1992; Chaloupka and Grossman,

1996; Evans, Farrelly, and Montgomery, 1996; Chaloupka, Pakula, Grossman, and Gardiner, 1997; Ohsfeldt, Boyle, and Capilouto, 1999).

- Imposing severe penalties for carrying concealed handguns without a permit reduced firearm homicides and robberies in Massachusetts (Webster, Chaulk, Teret, and Wintemute, 1991) and Detroit (O'Carroll, Lotfin, Waller, et al. 1991).

Researchers are beginning to understand the impact of alcohol and tobacco marketing on young people. Communities can counter the effects of alcohol and tobacco advertising by doing the following:

- Prohibiting alcohol and tobacco billboards and other forms of outdoor advertising near schools and other locations where children are likely to be present.

- Limiting the number of alcohol and tobacco advertisements that can be placed in the windows of alcohol retail outlets.

- Requesting that local radio and television stations not air alcohol advertisements during programs that attract a significant number of young listeners or viewers.

- Publicizing efforts to limit alcohol, tobacco, and firearms advertising and industry sponsorships.

Key Strategy 10: Enforcement of Community Policies to Limit Youth Access to Substances and Weapons

Consistent enforcement and reinforcement are needed to enhance the effectiveness of community policies on substance abuse and violence. Local law enforcement should be represented on any community board, health task force, or school and community coalition whose purpose is to prevent substance abuse and violence. Enforcement efforts can conduct undercover community buying operations with law enforcement. These operations should provide both positive and negative feedback to merchants. These activities are effective in increasing retailer compliance with underage-drinking laws (Biglan, Henderson, Humphrey, et al., 1995; Lewis, Paine-Andrews, Fawcett, et al., 1996).

- Educate adults about keeping guns and other weapons out of reach of children. Some cities and states make firearms-owners responsible for storing firearms in a way that makes them inaccessible to children. Through educational campaigns and direct intervention, school personnel, health care providers, law enforcement personnel, and parents can work together to make sure that weapons in homes are locked and completely inaccessible to children and adolescents.

- Increase local and state budgets for effective prevention programs, including community policing and high-risk youth programs.

- Reclaim housing projects, parks, and other places where young people congregate to drink alcohol or to buy, sell, or abuse drugs.

- Identify and report illegal drug activities, and underage drinking to police.

Key Strategy 11: Community-wide Communication Campaigns to Influence Community Norms about Substance Abuse and Violence among Youth

Communities must have an understanding of a problem if they are to accept and support efforts directed at that problem. School and media efforts, for example, are effective tools for increasing awareness of the likelihood of apprehension and punishment for liquor and tobacco sales to minors and for reducing retailer noncompliance with those laws. Community communication campaigns are more successful when they:

- Are combined with other prevention strategies (Flynn, Worder, Secker-Walker, et al., 1992; Flynn, Worder, Secker-Walker, et al.,1995; McKnight and Streff, 1994).

- Present messages that appeal to young people's motives for using substances or behaving violently. For example, young people tend to be more concerned about the immediate effects of smoking than about the long-term effects. (Flay and Sobel, 1983; Flynn, Worder, Secker- Walker et al., 1997; Paglia and Room, 1998) Messages that appeal to or correct young people's perceptions of risk are more likely to be effective than messages that do not. For example, messages could correct student misperceptions of the risks associated with smoking marijuana. Counter-advertising campaigns that disseminate information about the hazards of smoking and the way in which the tobacco industry targets consumers may help reduce cigarette sales (Lewit, Coate, and Grossman, 1981; Schneider, Klein, and Murphy, 1981) and tobacco consumption. (Wallack and DeJong, 1995; Chaloupka and Grossman, 1996; Flay, 1987).

- Address young people's perceptions about the pervasiveness of substance abuse, violent and aggressive behavior, and weapons. Messages that correct misconceptions about the prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse among peers show promise (Hansen and Graham, 1991). Students are more likely to drink alcohol if they believe most of their peers drink and more likely to refrain from drinking if they believe most of their peers do not drink.

- Put messages where young people are likely to see and hear them. Pay for television and radio spots at times when youth are likely to view or listen (Flynn, Worder, Secker-Walker, et al., 1997). Place placards about underage drinking and smoking in liquor stores or stores that sell cigarettes.

- Tailor messages to the audience. Assess student attitudes and beliefs about violence and substance abuse (or use available survey data), and tailor a prevention campaign accordingly (Flynn, Worder, Secker-Walker, et al., 1997). The interests of youth also vary by gender, ethnicity, and geography.

- Avoid using authority figures to admonish bad behavior and avoid using scare tactics.

Conclusion

These strategies are more likely to be effective when combined with strategies that work directly with children and families and that try to create and maintain a school environment that complement and reinforce community norms. Information on these strategies can be found in these National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention publications:

- *Key Strategies for Violence and Substance Abuse Prevention I: Working with Children and Families*
- *Key Strategies for Violence and Substance Abuse Prevention II: Working with the Classroom and the School Environment*

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