

Helping Youth in High Risk Environments

By Sibyl K. Bowie and Brigette Settles Scott, M.A.

Closing the Gap, Substance Abuse Prevention: What's Working to Keep Our Youth Drug Free?
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Experts agree, when it comes to decreasing the risk of substance abuse among adolescents, the more eyes watching our children, the less likely they'll fall prey to substance abuse. Family members and peers can act as primary influences, but non-traditional folk—teachers, ministers, neighbors, and babysitters to coaches and school counselors—are also key, and can help deliver consistent messages about the dangers of drugs.

Innovation, Creativity, Variety – Project Youth Connect

Research indicates that risk-taking behaviors in youth may be reduced when teens develop personal relationships with positive adult role models. Project Youth Connect (PYC) offers youth ages 9 to 15 a variety of non-traditional drug and alcohol abuse prevention programs. Funded by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP), a part of HHS' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), PYC focuses on youth at-risk for substance abuse. Fifteen grantees, or study sites, representing a range of non-profit, for-profit, and university settings, were awarded funding in October 1998 to implement PYC. About half of these study sites serve Hispanic, African American, and Asian/Pacific Islander youth. Four sites specifically target Asian/Pacific Islander communities, and two sites assist Native Americans. PYC has enrolled a total of 2,155 students at the project sites located in 14 states.

The primary purpose is to generate knowledge about the effectiveness of providing mentoring/advocacy services to high-risk youth and their families in the prevention, reduction, or delay of drug and alcohol use in youth. The program also aims to improve family bonding and functioning, school bonding and functioning, and life management skills.

Acting as a liaison and advocate, PYC mentors help the youth and their families to overcome the language, cultural, and economic barriers that can make it difficult to receive the

much needed social services. PYC mentors have also been trained to develop Individual Service Plans to help connect youth and their families with outside resources, thus empowering program participants and their families to build upon their strengths and capabilities.

In Portland, Oregon, PYC at Self-Enhancement, Inc. (SEI), provides mentoring for students at two city middle schools, a time

when antisocial behavior becomes reinforced in adolescents. "SEI's motto is 'life has options,'" explains David Allen, SEI's project director. "PYC provided an opportunity for us to expand some of the services we already had in place."

SEI developed a comprehensive prevention/education program, involving a variety

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Adolescent Substance Abuse Statistics

The 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse provides national estimates of rates of use, number of users, and other measures related to use of illicit drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and other forms of tobacco by the population, ages 12 years and older. This survey is conducted through questionnaires and interviews.

- ◆ An estimated 14.8 million Americans were current users of illicit drugs in 1999, meaning they used an illicit drug at least once during the 30 days prior to the interview. This estimate represents 6.7 percent of the population 12 years and older.
- ◆ The rates of current illicit drug use for major racial/ethnic groups were 6.6 percent for whites, 6.8 percent for Hispanics, and 7.7 percent for African Americans. The rate was highest among the American Indian/Alaska Native populations (10.6 percent) and among persons reporting multiple race (11.2 percent). Asian Americans had the lowest rate at 3.2 percent.
- ◆ Among youth ages 12-17, 10.9 percent reported past month use of illicit drugs in 1999. Marijuana is the major illicit drug used by this group; 7.7 percent of youths were current users of marijuana in 1999.
- ◆ American Indian/Alaska Natives had the highest rate of illicit drug use among youth age 12-17 (19.6 percent). The youth rate of use was 8.4 percent for Asian

youths, 10.7 percent for African American youths, 10.9 percent for White youths, 11.4 percent for Hispanic youths, and 11.6 percent for youths reporting multiple race.

- ◆ Although overall illicit drug use rates were similar for White, African American, and Hispanic youths age 12-17 years, there were gender differences within these major race/ethnic groups. Among White boys and girls were about equally likely to be current illicit drug users (10.8 percent for males, 11.1 percent for females). However, among African Americans and Hispanics, rates were higher among boys than among girls (12.6 percent compared with 8.7 percent for African Americans; 12.3 percent compared with 10.5 percent for Hispanics).
- ◆ Among youths age 12-17 years, the rate of current hallucinogen use was highest among American Indian/Alaska Natives (3.7 percent), and lowest among African Americans (0.2 percent). The overall rate for this age group was 1.1 percent.
- ◆ Although consumption of alcoholic beverages is illegal for those under 21 years of age, 10.4 million current drinkers were age 12-20 in 1999. Of this group, 6.8 million engaged in binge drinking, including 2.1 million who would also be classified as heavy drinkers. ❖



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of activities. Currently, there are approximately 239 students enrolled in PYC at SEI. Ashley Goodlow, a 14 year old, eighth grade African American girl, has been involved with the program for approximately a year and a half. "It's a good program," said Goodlow. "It's kind of like school, but more fun." Daily activities include cooking lessons, arts & crafts and 'Beauty Wise'—an activity where girls learn proper grooming and hygiene. Woven into each of these activities are abstinence and substance abuse prevention messages.

Lessons Learned

SEI found that greater program commitment and success results when mentors are paid. "We had a lot more success with the paid mentors than we did with the voluntary mentors," explains Allen. "It's hard to get a commitment from the volunteer mentors. Since it's a job for the paid mentors, it's a lot easier to maintain relationships, build relationships, and stay consistent in the child's life. Consistency, we have found, is very important, because lots of the kids we have here have had a lot of broken promises made to them."

"The kids had a hard time with inconsistency. So I think the paid mentor has brought that [consistency], and another caring adult into their lives. Allen continued. "After a relationship is built, kids share all kinds of things with their mentors that the schools and families don't know," said Allen. And, one important element that was confirmed through PYC is that "young people really do need someone to talk to. They don't think it's cool to talk to their parents, yet they need encouragement and more direction," Allen concludes.

"I really like spending time with my mentor," said Goodlow. "She helps me out a lot. She's nice, and I can talk to her about anything—she understands. She gives me advice, and helps me solve my problems," she added.

Most PYC mentors work with an average of 11 adolescents during a 23-month period, spending approximately two hours per week

in one-on-one time with the youth. Together, they engage in dance lessons, sports, fishing, crafts, dining out, and shopping. Life skills, including self-esteem building, social and communication skills development, goal-setting, and academic support, such as tutoring and college tours are also routine activities. Services for families usually include biweekly, group parenting classes.

"Our life skills classes help me understand the things that I shouldn't do that can hurt me," explained Goodlow. "They show us movies on how people do drugs, what affects drugs and alcohol can have, and that you can die from using them," she added.

Evaluating Success

The research component of PYC has helped SEI and other organizations assess how middle school youth feel about school, friends, life, and substance use.

A Portland-based research and evaluation firm surveys the enrollees every eight months and will evaluate how effective mentoring services are in positively impacting these student's lives.

"I'm sure the evaluation will conclude that our program has been very successful, because it has given young people opportunities to connect with adults whom they've learned to trust. Many of our kids are from single parent households or living with grandparents, and yearn for someone to talk and listen to them. Our mentors were able to establish intimate relationships with these kids—oftentimes the first positive adult-teen relationship. They also worked with the parents to encourage involvement in school and social activities. I guess, if you can claim that you've helped one or two kids steer clear of drugs, then you can claim success—and this is a claim that we are able to make," said Allen.

For more information on Project Youth Connect and other CSAP funded programs, visit <http://www.samsha.gov>. ❖

