

Substance Abuse Prevention Speaker Guidelines

Vermont Department of Health, 2003

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Section One: Guidelines for Prevention Grantees

School or community-based prevention programs sometimes invite outside speakers or panels to present as part of their prevention programs. Likewise, there are a range of projects that provide speakers: prevention programs; theatre groups; people in recovery from addiction; friends and family members of people in recovery; or speakers who are in the correctional system due to an alcohol and/or drug related offense. Sometimes drivers involved in alcohol or drug related traffic crashes are court ordered to speak as part of their sentence. Storytelling is a powerful educational tool. These guidelines are offered to assist programs in maximizing the benefit of these visits.

The speaker's presentation needs to:

- **Be part of a comprehensive prevention program**

Youth who try alcohol, tobacco or other drugs do so for a variety of reasons. Comprehensive programs have the most impact on youth. These programs include interactive classroom curricula, leadership programs, mentoring programs or community service, family support, and education and community action on substance abuse issues.

- **Support the overall objectives of the educational program**

For example, the objective of your program may be to discourage substance use, educate youth about alternatives to substance use, or to share a message of experience, hope and recovery with people in the audience who may be abusing substances or are affected by the addiction of a friend or family member. It is important that the message that the speaker is giving reinforces the objective of your overall program.

- **Address the needs of the target audience:**

- **General Audiences of Youth**

- General audiences include a broad range of youth, many of whom are not using substances. These children and adolescents may receive a different message from a presentation than what was intended.

- **Elementary School Age**

- Students younger than age 12 often still perceive the world as either good or bad. It is difficult for them to separate the person from their behavior. The speaker's "bad behavior" may cloud any prevention message they may deliver and the disease concept is difficult for young students to understand.

- **Middle and High School Age**

- Rather than interpreting the intended "Don't do as I did" message as a reason to avoid similar mistakes, students may conclude that a speaker who has used drugs, survived, and possibly has celebrity status, is an attractive role model. They may decide that drug use is not as dangerous as it has been made out to be.

- Because of the possibility that youth may misinterpret the message, having persons in recovery speak about their personal recovery for general youth audiences, such as school assemblies, is discouraged. (This is in no way meant to discourage recovering people from doing prevention work with young people.)

- Court ordered speakers are also discouraged from presenting to general youth audiences such as school assemblies.

Youth Who Have Started Experimenting

Since identification with a speaker is the key to an effective message, personal stories can be effective when used with students who are already experimenting with drugs or who exhibit other risk-related behaviors. We suggest that these presentations be done with small groups. A trained facilitator should be present to assist in a follow-up group discussion.

Adults

Recovering speakers may also be very appropriate for adult audiences. Such presentations raise awareness about recovery, debunk the myth that addiction is hopeless, and exemplify the positive outcomes of intervention and treatment efforts. In the school-based setting, it is **essential** for school staff to hear about the recovery process. Such personal stories help school staff understand the needs of students and parents in recovery, and support continuing outpatient plans or aftercare plans for students who may be returning to school after residential treatment.

- **Promote the benefits of building relationships without using substances**

- **Avoid scare tactics**

Scare tactics and sensationalism are known to sometimes stimulate mixed reactions. Some students are attracted to the excitement and danger linked to alcohol and drug use. Scare tactics challenge some defiant students to prove the authority figures are wrong. Students who believe a presentation is exaggerated or untrue may ignore the meaning of the message. Respecting the ability of an audience to make a right decision based on accurate information is better than trying to force a group to behave or believe a certain way.

- **Avoid illustrations or dramatizations which may inadvertently teach people ways to prepare, obtain, or ingest illegal drugs**

- **Show that illegal drug use is harmful**

This includes: tobacco for anyone under 18; alcohol for anyone under 21; prescription drugs that are not prescribed to you or using prescribed drugs in a manner that is not recommended by the prescribing physician; and drugs that are illicit through law such as marijuana or heroin. To imply that there is a “safe” level of illegal drug use may encourage use. For example, to classify marijuana as “soft” while calling heroin a “hard” drug may inadvertently encourage marijuana use.

- **De-glamorize substance use**

- **Avoid demeaning those who use alcohol or other drugs**

- **Give the message that addiction is an illness**

- **Give the message that there are resources for help**

- **Avoid attempting to solve problems of a personal or individual nature during a question and answer period**

It is recommended that a plan be set up with a student assistance counselor or clinician in the community prior to the presentation so that participants who want help with a personal alcohol and drug issue can easily access that help after the presentation.

Section Two: Resources

The VDH Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs (ADAP) suggests that, where appropriate, you use a speaker from Friends of Recovery-VT (802-229-6103 or www.friendsofrecoveryvt.org).

ADAP also recommends that educational programs follow the host and speaker responsibilities, as developed by the Association of Student Assistance Professionals in their *Speaker Guidelines* policy (www.asap-vt.org).

Section Three: Sources

Guidelines for Planning and Conducting a Student Awareness Program. Maine Department of Educational and Cultural Services, Division of Alcohol and Drug Education Services, February 1988.

Making the Grade: A Guide to School Drug Prevention Programs. Drug Strategies, 1999.

Making the Most of Visitors. Tacade & London Drug Policy Forum, 1997.

“Models of School Based Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Models.” The Prevention Researcher, 3 (1), Integrated Research Services, Inc.

Preventing Drug Use Among Children and Adolescents. National Institute on Drug Abuse, 1997.

Texas Prevention Resource Guide: Drug and Violence Education, Texas Education Agency (<http://dave.esc4.net>)

Section Four: Vermont Department of Health (VDH), Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs (ADAP) Funds

ADAP Community Grant Funds Cannot Support the Following:

- Speakers for “one-shot” assemblies or activities that are not linked to the school’s educational program;
- Educational activities that depict substance use or illustrate how to prepare, obtain or ingest substances;
- Recovery speakers with general K-6 audiences (note: grants can support programs in which family members in recovery are speaking to elementary audiences about coping with a family member’s addiction).
- Court ordered speakers with general K-6 audiences

If ADAP prevention grantees are utilizing speakers in ADAP funded prevention programs, they are responsible for monitoring and evaluating this activity to assure that it is accomplishing the intended objective.