

ALERT Teen Leaders Can Make a Difference

Here are the answers to five frequently asked questions:

Why Use Teen Leaders?

Positive peer influence contributes to the effectiveness of drug prevention programs. Research confirms this time and again.

Two versions of the Project ALERT curriculum were developed during the original design phase. One that uses older teens as role models in the classroom along with a Project ALERT teacher, and one that is taught by the Project ALERT teacher alone. In the original Project ALERT evaluation study conducted by RAND, students in schools that involved teen leaders in Core Curriculum lessons were less susceptible to several drug use risk factors than students taught solely by their classroom teacher.

What is the Basic Premise Behind Using Teen Leaders?

The use of teen leaders derives from social learning and communication theory. Social learning theory posits that adolescents learn from others. They learn through direct imitation and by social approval or disapproval of beliefs, attitudes and behavior. Communication theory stresses the persuasiveness of credible communicators - communicators that project familiarity and have the ability to easily relate. Both theories support the use of teen leaders.

Who Makes an Effective Teen Leader?

Teen leaders should be credible role models who have positive self-images, communicate well, have leadership abilities, and are team players. All teen leaders should be current nonusers of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

How Are Teen Leaders Involved in Project ALERT?

An optional teen leader program, using high school students as optimal role models, is available to supplement Core Lessons 5, 6, 7, 9 and 11 of the Project ALERT curriculum. The program involves teen leaders in the key teaching strategies behind the curriculum: reinforcement and validation, resistance, self-efficacy, modeling, respect and enthusiasm.

By using real-life examples of how to resist pro-drug pressures, Project ALERT teen leaders show sixth and seventh graders that it is possible to be both successful and drug free. Generally, teen leaders are involved in the affecting and skill-building elements of the curriculum, while the informational parts are reserved for the teacher.

Students often focus on the teen leaders, who work in pairs, rather than the teacher. Pairing teens provides mutual support and often appeals to a wider spectrum of sixth or seventh grade backgrounds and interests. If possible, each pair should contain a male and a female and represent different ethnic groups or campus cliques.

The same teen leader pair returns to the same group of students for all five of the teen-led Project ALERT lessons. In this way, valuable rapport is established between students and their teen leaders. It does require that teen leaders be released from five periods of their own classes to gain this enriching experience.

What Specific Steps Are Involved in Working with Teen Leaders?

A manual is available free of charge that includes guidance in the recruitment and selection of the teen leaders, their training, and lesson plans for working with them in the classroom.

Many high schools have peer counseling or other types of Student Assistance Programs (SAP's) already in place. The students involved in such programs often fulfill the criteria for an effective teen leader. Frequently, a school counselor serves as the advisor to the group and can become an important member of the teen leader recruitment and training process.

Working effectively with teen leaders in the classroom takes a special kind of individual. Teachers working with teen leaders must be able to share the teaching tasks with them - to function as a team. Often the teacher is supporting the teens or is providing an authoritative or cognitive balance that the teens are unable to provide. Both in and out of the classroom, it means balancing firm direction with the ability to allow the teens to assume responsibility for their own performances.

Training teen leaders takes considerable time since the manual recommends twelve extra curricular training sessions that wrap around the five lessons the teen leaders deliver in the classroom. Ideally, both a Project ALERT teacher and the peer counseling SAP advisor comprise the teen leader training team. Both need to know what is expected of the teen leaders in the classroom and have a good grasp of group dynamics and facilitation techniques.

Teachers tell us that working with teen leaders in the classroom adds a whole new dimension to the learning process. Having two additional team members to stimulate students encourages work in both small and large groups and gives the teacher the opportunity to stand back and observe student progress of special problems. However, working with teens in the classroom also requires time outside the classroom to meet with the teens in order to rehearse, analyze, and improve upon classroom performance and to lend ongoing support and counsel.

If you are a trained Project ALERT teacher and want to learn more about the Teen Leader program or would like a complimentary copy of the Teen Leader Training Manual, contact your State Coordinator. Just call 1-800-ALERT-10.