



PREVENTION IN THE BLOCK

BY ISABEL BURK

WIDESPREAD USE

of block scheduling has resulted in both flexibility and challenges for teachers across the country. Block works very well with Project ALERT, both for the core 11 lessons and 3 booster lessons. The expanded time allows lessons to be paced to your needs, learning activities can be processed, homework can be reviewed with feedback.

Project ALERT does not recommend that you try to squeeze two lessons into a single block period. Authentic learning requires time to reflect and to connect new materials and experiences with a person's knowledge, attitudes and beliefs. Trying to cram in too much can result in decreased retention and poorer performance. Block periods offer options for enhancement and reinforcement of concepts and skills. Lesson by lesson, we offer some tips.

Lesson One sets the tone for the program. As you collaboratively establish ground rules, take a few extra minutes to introduce key points of your school's alcohol/drug policy.

In this first lesson, students may slip and mention names or refer to specific people such as "my brother" or "my cousin." Gently remind the group to use the phrase "I know someone who" to be respectful of other people's privacy. Be wary of student stories about family addiction, drug use, alcoholism, etc. Some stories may be distracting or upsetting, taking away from the goals of the lesson. Instead, reassure your students that you or other staff members are available to talk privately. You may want to post the names of the school counselor, school nurse, or others.

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IS IT ALL RIGHT TO TEACH PROJECT ALERT IN SIXTH GRADE INSTEAD OF SEVENTH?



"Cognitive and experiential differences between sixth and seventh graders are substantial enough to make a difference in what they get out of the lessons."

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When the group reporters read their lists for Activity 3 *Make Reasons Lists*, take a moment to clarify terms and address misconceptions and myths. (See Curriculum pages 1.10 and 1.11.)

Marijuana as “medicine” is likely to appear on the list, as this issue has been in the news lately. This would be a good time to let students know about the experimental nature of “medicinal” marijuana, including questions about effectiveness and dosage. Remind students that if an illness is serious, medicine is usually taken under a doctor’s care. It can be dangerous to self-diagnose and self-treat a suspected illness. Treating yourself may relieve symptoms temporarily, but that may not be safe. Suppressing symptoms might keep a person from seeking medical advice, and that would delay a correct diagnosis. Taking the wrong medicine could make an illness worse.



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house unexpectedly. Praise their ideas and tell students that they are really preparing well for unexpected situations. Ask volunteers to guess how this video might end. After a few comments, see how students think Colleen’s parents would feel about what happened, or if students think this incident will affect Colleen’s parents’ trust in her.

Lesson Three can be extended by using more *Alcohol Facts*. Students can work in groups of two to develop *Tobacco Facts* that can be used for a similar game when you have a few minutes left in class.

Reinforce **Lesson Four** by allowing groups of students to create ad messages that promote healthy choices. Collage/drawing/cartoons/photos can be used, with the results displayed in the room or hallway. Multi-media ideas could include PowerPoint slide commercials, 30-second vocal announcements; 60-second video commercials.

Find some advertisements with photos and cover up words and text. Ask the class what they think the ads are selling. After discussion, show the full ad. Many times the photos aren’t directly related to the product, but instead are used to draw interest and convey emotions.

If you have time, discuss billboards. Note how often tobacco and alcohol are displayed on billboards—why? Possibilities: advertisers want to reach many people every day; want to “become part of the neighborhood;” want to stimulate someone to buy on impulse; draw in new customers or keep current customers. Ask students why some communities have banned billboards for alcohol or tobacco or have restricted where such billboards can be located.

Lesson Two focuses on knowledge, attitudes and consequences. During the two main brainstorming activities, taking a few extra minutes can boost the list-making process. Allow for more question and answer time if necessary.

As students examine Posters 1-5, ask them to ignore the words and explain what they think the artist was trying to portray with pictures. If there is time, select some students and ask them to describe how they would create a poster for each of these topics: what graphics, colors, phrases would they use? This can become an additional activity at some point, possibly in conjunction with an art class.

To process the video, first ask the questions in the curriculum on pages 2.4 and 2.5. Then remind the class that they will face lots of on-the-spot decisions. Ask the group to come up with different ways Colleen could have handled the situation when the kids showed up at her



Lesson Five introduces structured role play. A longer class period will allow for critical video viewing and processing each skit, with feedback and reinforcement of effective body language and tone. Praise students' solutions and delivery, reinforcing their belief that they can do this in real life.

After the group views Lindsey's third solution, *Stand Up to Pressure*, discuss how Lindsey might feel at this point. Could she be angry at Eric for pressuring her? Could she feel hurt or disappointed? Point out that some of Eric's lines might be used in other situations. For example, "Come on, one won't hurt you" might also be used to pressure someone to have an alcoholic drink or shoplift.

Distribute the *Parent/Adult Interview* for homework, and invite students to discuss how a professional reporter would conduct such an interview. You'll want to include ideas such as asking for a few minutes of uninterrupted time; selecting a private area for the interview; taking notes; checking your understanding; transferring the final report onto the Student Handout. Reinforce the importance of being a good listener.

Lesson Six prepares students for the reality of feeling "on the spot." For some, it can be difficult to say "no" to someone that is standing close by, urging them to let go, forget their troubles, etc. Watching refusals can also be a learning experience, especially as teens notice each other gaining confidence throughout the class period. A longer class allows you to vary your pressure approaches and props, and praise each student's ability to refuse.



Students usually giggle at the graphics on Poster 10, *Pressures From Inside Yourself*, with the head portraying different points of view. You can use this poster to spur a discussion about how common it is to have competing ideas/opinions/thoughts. Explain that adults also take time to sort things out, and it's good to practice this process to get better at it.



In **Lesson Seven**, role play is featured again. In the video, some older teens offer a joint to two younger teens. In this situation, students learn the power of peer support. After you show each video solution, elicit students' ideas about how to enlist the help of a friend or peer in a tough situation. After each group's skits, be sure to tell students you believe in their ability to say "no", to stick to their decision, to stay in control.

This is a good time to review the homework assignment from Lesson Five, *Parent/Adult Interviews on Peer Pressure*. Use the questions on page 7.6 to guide the group discussion. Also ask what they found surprising in their interview; what was most fun about being a reporter; what was difficult? It would be interesting to know how students imagine they would answer the same questions if they are parents in the future, and are being interviewed by their teenage child.

Lesson Eight is a change of pace, dealing with prevention of a dangerous practice, inhalant abuse. Inhalant abuse is the deliberate inhalation of fumes or vapors from products such as aerosol cans, cement or butane lighters. Huffing (breathing fumes in through the mouth), sniffing (breathing in fumes through the nose) and dusting (breathing fumes from an aerosol computer cleaner) may be initiated by children as young as 9 or 10, and can continue throughout adulthood.

In 2008, 9 percent of 8th graders reported they had abused an inhalant product in the past year. Many teens don't understand the risks. They may not realize that gases you can't see or smell can be harmful, that toxic fumes crowd out air and oxygen in the lungs, depriving the brain of oxygen. While inhaling product fumes, teens may fall unconscious and get hurt, slip into a coma, suffer heart problems or die.

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Working with Activity 6 on page 8.3, emphasize the importance of reading labels carefully, then discuss how many companies are changing the chemicals in their products to make them safer, to protect air quality and to protect consumers. More and more people are looking for safer products and the stores now sell more to choose from. For instance, some fingernail polish manufacturers now make polish without toluene, a chemical that can be dangerous to inhale. Paint with no odor or very low odor (low VOC=low volatile organic compounds) sells for a few dollars more than standard paint.

While you process Activity 8, note that some things are difficult for teens to handle alone, and there are adults to talk to if they are concerned about someone or something. Acknowledge how stressful it can be to keep secrets, too. Name a few adults in the school or community who are available, and brainstorm others who might be helpful.

By the way, it may be interesting to see what products in school might be changed for safer alternatives. Students can conduct an environmental survey to help identify products with potential to pollute, then research safer substitutes. For instance, instead of aerosol computer cleaner, a brush can be used to clean keyboards. Cement or liquid glue can be replaced with a glue stick. See what else they can find.

In **Lesson Nine**, students get a chance to show off what they've learned. Praise student responses to the *Pressures From Inside Yourself* poster, reinforcing their feelings of self-efficacy. During the prep time for skits (Activity 3) encourage groups to be creative about the situations they set up, and be sure to note the resistance and refusal skills, downplaying the pressuring students. As time permits, students can read *Ten Questions Teenagers Ask Most About Drugs—and Their Answers* and prepare their *Oral Report on Drugs*.

Lesson Ten can be both informative and motivating. Nonsmokers often wonder why smokers don't just stop smoking, and younger smokers need to know about the process of quitting.

The video presents both benefits and challenges of smoking cessation, and Activity 4 *Making Quitting Lists*, elicits practical quitting strategies that can be adapted immediately. Once again, when discussing smoking, refer to the ground rules so no one is mentioned specifically by name or relation.

Additional time can be used in Activity 5, *Making Changes in My Life*. Model a generic way to change a habit, such as biting nails or eating junk food. Students need to know that change takes time and practice, and they should not be discouraged if they slip back into old behavior once or twice. Help the group understand that it's not important to focus on slips, it's important to focus on the goal. If a person focuses on the benefits of making a desired change, along with support, he or she can resolve to try again.

The final lesson of Project ALERT's base year, **Lesson Eleven**, reinforces teens' positive attitudes and commitment to healthy lifestyle. After you read aloud some of the personalized commitment statements, refer back to the video in Lesson Seven and their work in Lesson Ten, focusing on peer support for healthy behaviors. Remind them they are not alone. Then ask the group for ideas of what to say if a younger sister or brother asked for advice about cigarettes, alcohol or marijuana. Discuss how they can be there for others.



Conclude Project ALERT on a hopeful tone, reminding the group about prevention and counseling resources in school or the community, and expressing your confidence in their future. And pat yourself on the back, well done!



Project ALERT trainer Isabel Burk is a nationally known expert on health, prevention and education issues. She provides technical assistance, program consultation and training to schools and organizations across the country. She specializes in issues related to school drug policy, inhalant abuse and OTC/Herbal/Supplements.

She can be contacted at isabel@healthnetwork.org, 845-638-3569, or visit her website: www.healthnetwork.org

6TH OR 7TH ?

BY ANDREA WARREN

Is it all right to teach Project ALERT in sixth grade instead of seventh?

This question has come to Project ALERT again and again. While the program was researched and designed for seventh and eighth grades, at a time when junior high schools were prevalent, today's transition into middle school typically occurs in sixth grade. This, coupled with the common belief that earlier is better when it comes to helping adolescents develop drug resistance skills, begs the question: why not start Project ALERT in sixth grade? Until now there has been no Project ALERT research to definitively address the middle school configuration.

But a new Project ALERT study suggests that many sixth graders lack the maturity to effectively learn resistance skills—leaving them no better off than peers who do not receive drug education.

The study,¹ conducted by the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) with funding from the U.S. Justice Department, analyzed information gathered from sixth grade students before they began Project ALERT, again when they had completed the booster lessons in seventh grade, and then a year later when they were in eighth

grade. PIRE researchers concluded that their findings “do not support the long term effectiveness of Project ALERT as delivered to sixth graders.”

“I would have been pleased to learn it works equally well with both sixth and seventh graders,” said Phyllis Ellickson, PhD, a Senior Behavioral Scientist at the RAND Corporation who headed the team that developed Project ALERT and who served as an advisor to the PIRE study.



“We designed ALERT for seventh graders, with booster lessons the following year, knowing they are more likely to have the experiential and cognitive abilities to benefit from it.”

—Phyllis Ellickson

knowing they are more likely to have the experiential and cognitive abilities to benefit from it. Our own studies have confirmed the long-term value of delivering Project ALERT this way.”

CHOOSING SIXTH GRADE

Ellickson is well aware why schools may choose to introduce it earlier. “Seventh grade used to be the transitional year when students moved to a new school to start junior high. This exposed them to

Project ALERT'S Impact on Seventh Graders

All the research and testing that go into Project ALERT have yielded solid outcomes for seventh graders.

The RAND Corporation, a nonprofit public policy research institute headquartered in Santa Monica, California, has put the program through two rigorous evaluations and two independent assessments of its effectiveness. Based on one study's results, sections of Project ALERT were revised, and when retested, showed improved outcomes.

A report on seventh graders who have completed Project ALERT includes the following results when compared against a control group:

- A 38 percent reduction in marijuana initiation in moderate-risk students.
- A 26 percent reduction in cigarette smoking by moderate-risk students.
- A 19 percent reduction in new smokers.
- A 23 percent drop in weekly smokers.
- A 40 percent drop in students already experimenting with cigarettes in becoming regular smokers.
- A 24 percent lower alcohol misuse score.
- A 20 percent reduction of highest-risk early drinkers.
- A 60 percent decrease in current marijuana use.
- A 20 to 25 percent decrease in cigarette use during the past month.
- A 33 to 55 percent decrease in regular and heavy usage of cigarettes.

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older youth and more freedom, which made them more vulnerable to drug use. Many students now enter middle school in sixth grade. At the same time, some communities are seeing more drug use among sixth graders than in the past. So it's understandable that districts might want to introduce Project ALERT in sixth grade."

But Ellickson points out that the PIRE study supports earlier research suggesting that the cognitive and experiential differences between sixth and seventh graders are substantial enough to make a difference in what they get out of the lessons. At the same time, she feels that much more research is needed in this field to fully understand the adolescent brain and the developmental differences between twelve, thirteen, and fourteen-year-olds.

"It's an on-going process," she said. "We still have many unanswered questions about these ages and why this program works better with seventh graders than sixth. PIRE has given us a valid, well-analyzed study that shows no statistically significant outcome when it's taught in sixth grade. It would be helpful to have a study of a third model used by some districts, which is to split the program in thirds and teach it equally in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. But long-range studies are very expensive and it's difficult to find schools that can help with randomized research trials.

"For now, we need to go with what we know. The results suggest that seventh graders are developmentally ready for Project ALERT and sixth graders are not. If districts are wondering which grade to put it in, I would strongly encourage schools to start with seventh grade."

THE PIRE STUDY

The goal of PIRE researchers was to evaluate the impact of a school-based drug prevention program on sixth graders, determining if results in place thirty days after students completed the program and its booster lessons were still in place one year later. The study, a large randomized controlled clinical trial, also looked at the program's impact on other outcomes, including use of alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, and inhalants.

Researchers selected Project ALERT because it meets all government criteria for an evidence-based curriculum and it is also one of the two most widely disseminated programs in American schools—an honor it shares with Life Skills Training. Project ALERT is listed in the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices and in 2001 achieved the Exemplary Program rating from the U.S. Department of Education, one of only nine programs to receive this status.

Participating schools agreed to enroll all sixth grade students who had received parental approval. Schools were randomly assigned to the control and intervention conditions. Neither could receive any additional drug education during the course of the study. Students in the intervention groups received the eleven basic Project ALERT lessons in sixth grade and the three

booster lessons in seventh grade. Information was gathered from them before they began Project ALERT, after completion of the last booster lesson in grade seven, and then a year later in eighth grade.



In thirty-four schools in eleven states, 5,782 students participated in the initial survey, which asked eighty-one questions. Of these students, a total of 4,940 completed the third questionnaire. No allowance was made for such variables as whether Project ALERT was introduced to students early

or late in the school year, or what might be the personal views of educators assigned to teach Project ALERT toward the subject matter.

UNDERSTANDING THE RESULTS

Students were questioned on their use of alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, and inhalants before and after program delivery. Results showed that one month after completing the Project ALERT booster lessons, program participants reported less alcohol use in the past thirty days than those who did not receive the program—a finding that was no longer in place a year later. Nor was there a positive impact on use of cigarettes, marijuana, or inhalants. Researchers

carefully considered past studies examining developmental differences between sixth and seventh graders. One such study comparing sixth graders and seventh graders found that seventh graders reported poorer psychological functioning, more interpersonal issues, and increased problem behavior.² They were also less likely to report another student using drugs or to fear getting caught using drugs.³

PIRE researchers acknowledged what they termed “at least one compelling reason” to offer a drug prevention curriculum to sixth graders: “The marked increase in the uptake of substance use between that grade and the one following. It has been reported that thirteen-year-olds are more likely than twelve-year-olds to know a teen who uses drugs, to know someone who sells drugs, and to be able to buy them.”³

But when the results of their study were carefully compiled, PIRE researchers concluded that, “We are concerned that the sixth graders who constituted our sample may have been developmentally unready for some of ALERT’s more challenging tasks, including role plays and small group work. Further, some of the

more abstract concepts discussed, such as the positive consequences of *not* using drugs, may have been developmentally inappropriate for this population.”

1. Ringwalt, Christopher L., Kovach Clark, Heddy, Hanley, Sean, Shamblen, Stephen R., & Flewelling, Robert L., (2009). Project ALERT: A Cluster Randomized Trial. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 163 (7): 625-632

2. Barber, B.K., & Olsen, J.A. (2004). Assessing the Transitions to Middle and High School. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 19, 3-30.

3. National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA). (1998). *Back to School 1998: National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse IV: Teens, Teachers and Principals*. New York: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.



Andrea Warren is a freelance journalist who lives in Kansas City. A former teacher, her award-winning nonfiction books for young readers include *Orphan Train Rider*, *One Boy's True Story*; *Surviving Hitler: A Boy in The Nazi Death Camps* and her latest book *Escape from Saigon: How a Vietnam War Orphan Became an American Boy*.

SMOKERS MIGHT QUIT FOR PETS

Some smokers may be willing to quit smoking if informed that secondhand smoke is causing harm to their pets, MSNBC reported.

Researcher Sharon Milberger of the Henry Ford Health System in Detroit and colleagues found that 28 percent of pet owners who smoke said they would attempt to stop if they knew that secondhand smoke from cigarettes caused health problems for their pets.

The researchers found that 11 percent of 3,293 pet owners said they would think about quitting, and 16 percent of nonsmoking pet owners who lived with someone who smoked would ask the smoker to quit (24 percent would ask the smoker to smoke outside).

Secondhand-smoke exposure may increase a pet’s risk of developing lung cancer, allergies, eye and skin



diseases, and respiratory problems. Roughly one-fifth of the 71 million American pet owners are smokers.

“For tobacco-control advocates, on our team we can now have vets and kennels and pet supply stores,” Millberger said. “So, for example, when someone takes Fluffy in to the vet, the vet can ask them about their smoking behavior and whether they allow smoking in their home.”



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BEST Foundation
 725 South Figueroa Street, Suite 1825
 Los Angeles CA 90017-5427
 (800) ALERT-10
 www.projectalert.com
 info@projectalert.best.org

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

The BEST Foundation for a Drug-Free Tomorrow is a nonprofit organization committed to providing schools and their community partners with the necessary information, materials and guidance to effectively implement Project ALERT, a skills-based substance abuse prevention curriculum for grades 7 and 8.

The services of BEST Foundation are funded through multi-year grant commitments from the **Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.**

CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

DATES		WHERE
Sept. 20-21, 2009	Kansas Coordinated School Health	Wichita, KS
Oct. 30-31, 2009	Washington Prevention Summit	Yakima, WA
Nov. 5-7, 2009	National Middle School Association	Indianapolis, IN
Nov. 6, 2009	Safe and Healthy Schools Conference	Oklahoma City, OK
Nov. 17-19, 2009	Arizona Mega Conference	Litchfield Park, AZ
Nov. 22-24, 2009	Georgia School Counselor Association	Atlanta, GA
Dec. 3-5, 2009	California School Board Association	San Diego, CA
Feb. 14-16, 2010	Texas School Counselor Association	Galveston, TX
Feb. 24-26, 2010	Wisconsin School Counselor Association	Stevens Point, WI
Feb. 26-28, 2010	California League of Middle Schools	Sacramento, CA
April 10-12, 2010	National School Boards Conference	Chicago, IL
June 10-12, 2010	National PTA Conference	Memphis, TN
July 3-6, 2010	American School Counselor Association	Boston, MA
	Kentucky School Counselor Association	