

Program Assumptions

Five key assumptions under-gird Project ALERT. Each of these assumptions is directly reflected in the curriculum.

Assumption 1

Adolescents start using drugs primarily because of social influences (peers, parents, siblings, media) and because they want to emulate behavior they view as socially desirable.

Implementation: The curriculum helps adolescents resist those social influences by 1) countering arguments that drug use is widespread and desirable (most people don't use drugs), 2) providing role models for non-use, and 3) teaching students specific resistance skills.

A unique feature of Project ALERT is its emphasis on helping students identify internal, as well as, external pressures to use drugs. Young adolescents frequently fail to recognize the subtle, yet powerful, ways they put pressure on themselves - even when no one is trying to influence them specifically ("I'll be left out if I don't act like the others."). Short, teacher-led psychodramas graphically portray these "pressures from inside ourselves." And, role-playing exercises help students learn techniques for resisting them.

Assumption 2

Drug prevention programs must help students develop the motivation to resist using drugs. Teaching resistance skills alone is not enough.

Implementation: The curriculum motivates non-use through appeals that relate directly to adolescents (stress immediate and social consequences of use) and videos that show older teens discussing why they don't use and how they have successfully resisted prodrug pressures. The curriculum, which makes use of teenagers' vulnerability to social norms (most teens don't do it), is presented by credible communicators (older teenagers and helpful teachers).

Research on adolescents indicates that teenagers tend to discount long-term risks and overestimate drug use among their peers. Thus, to provide greater motivation, Project ALERT stresses how drugs can affect students now, in their daily lives and social relationships. It also counters the belief that "everyone uses" with actual statistics showing that users are in the minority and with videos that depict successful non-users.

Further, the structure of each lesson and the teaching process are designed to increase learning and motivation. Studies have shown that the following factors help increase motivation and build resistance skills: providing discrete near-term goals that can be achieved in a single class lesson; actively involving students in the learning process; developing skills through demonstration and practice; and encouraging self-efficacy through positive and task-specific feedback. These four factors are an integral part of the curriculum.

Assumption 3

Drug prevention programs should target substances that are used first and most widely by young people.

Implementation: Because adolescents typically start using alcohol, tobacco, inhalants and marijuana before they try other drugs, Project ALERT focuses on these four substances.

Assumption 4

Much adolescent behavior stems from modeling the behavior of admired others, in particular, older teenagers who are close in age and, therefore, understand their concerns but have the authority of greater experience.

Implementation: Videos portray older teenagers discussing why they say "no" and displaying resistance skills. Students are encouraged to discuss how these teens resist pressures to use.

Assumption 5

Adolescents are much more likely to absorb new information and learn new skills when they are actively involved in the learning process.

Implementation: The curriculum promotes student involvement by eliciting students' responses rather than didactically explaining facts and values to them. It also utilizes role-playing, question and answer techniques, cooperative learning activities, and small group discussions to foster student participation and reinforce skills.

The participatory nature of the curriculum explains why it can be used so successfully with adolescents of varying academic capabilities, cultures, and social environments. The program starts with where the students are, and brings their individual experiences and beliefs into each lesson. Hence, Project ALERT adapts to the particular circumstances and background of each classroom and school and builds on the students' knowledge, beliefs, skills, and experiences.

It can be used effectively in highly diverse classrooms, with students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, with different academic capabilities, and with different levels of motivational readiness.

Seventh grade appears to be the optimum time for offering programs based on the social influence model. Most seventh graders have just made the transition that readies them socially and experientially to learn resistance skills. They have left the more sheltered environment of the elementary school and are becoming increasingly vulnerable to peer influences. At the same time, they are beginning to make more decisions on their own and are broadening their network of friends and acquaintances and thus, their exposure to various kinds of peer pressure. They also have a stronger cognitive base for understanding difficult concepts such as internal pressure.