

By Guy G. Golomb, Project ALERT Trainer

Children who learn about the risks of drugs at home from their parents are much less likely to use drugs than those who do not, according to a nationwide survey released in April of 1999 by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America. If parents don't talk to their children, someone else will, and often the information young people receive will be inaccurate. The Partnership stresses that parents should listen carefully. They should let kids know it's okay to act independently from their peers. They should role play how to say "no," encourage choice, provide age appropriate information, establish a clear family position on drugs, and teach children to follow rules. In addition, parents should be positive role models. Project ALERT's home learning activities provide a forum for this to occur.

Project ALERT's effectiveness is rooted in a number of research-based principles. One such principle is the need for parents to be partners in our efforts. One of Project ALERT's unique aspects is that homework involves parents/guardians.

Creating an opportunity for parents to engage in conversations with their children about drugs is a vital ingredient in drug prevention. The homework activities should be viewed as "home learning opportunities" that can reinforce the learning that occurs in the classroom. This type of parent/guardian involvement is part of Core Lessons 1, 5, 6, 8 and 9 and Booster Lesson 2. Among teenagers who said they had learned nothing about the risks of drugs from their parents, 45% reported using marijuana in the last year. Use dropped to 33% for those teens who said they learned "a little" about the risks from their parents, and to 26% for those who said they learned "a lot."

Getting the message across is a lot easier than some parents think. Here is where the structured home learning opportunities with Project ALERT help focus discussion between parents and kids. According to the Partnership's survey, virtually all parents (98%) reported talking to their kids at some point about drugs, but just 68% of the kids remembered the conversation and only 27% reported learning a lot at home on the issue.

Many of our 12,000 active Project ALERT teachers have reported positive feedback from parents/guardians as a result of the Project ALERT home learning opportunities. This has resulted in increased communication between home and school on a variety of issues like drug abuse.

Sometimes Project ALERT teachers express concern or skepticism about parental/guardian reaction or willingness to do this homework. Teachers are concerned that some students' parent/guardian is not available to complete the activities. In these cases, teachers can suggest doing them with any "trusted adult." This could include other extended family members, adult friends, another teacher, school counselor, or other school staff. If the concern is that it could be perceived as intrusive to family privacy, teachers can reassure parents that the information will not be shared in class and not graded. After all, the home learning assignment is designed to facilitate family discussion, not classroom discussion.

One way to minimize parental apprehension would be to provide a letter at the beginning of the Project ALERT course. A sample letter is shown on Page 4. This type of letter can give a "heads up" to parents, provide information about Project ALERT, enlist them in the school's efforts on drug prevention, stress the importance of family communication on this issue, and offer assurances of privacy.

In Lessons 5, 8 and 9, parents/guardians are asked to either be interviewed or complete activity evaluation forms. One way to encourage parental participation in home learning opportunities would be to request that they return only a signed “confirmation” that the activity was completed. This would alleviate some parents’ concerns, while allowing for the home conversation to occur, which is really the primary intent of the activities.

You may also want to provide parents with information about other resources available to them. The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy maintains two online prevention sites designed to deliver drug prevention messages and educational resources to children, parents and other adult caregivers. The site at www.freevibe.com was designed by ABC owner Disney. It is aimed at young people and combines interactivity and references to teen trends with a drug prevention theme. The second, America Online’s Parents’ Drug Resource Center (Keyword: Drug Help), offers resources to help identify and recognize kids who are at risk for drug abuse, provides information about where to go for help, suggestions on how parents can respond to kids’ tough questions, and drug information. The Partnership for a Drug Free America’s web site (www.drugfreeamerica.org) has an extensive Help for Parents section. Parents can also be provided with information from the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information at 1-800-SAY-NOTO.

Parents are young peoples’ most important teachers. The involvement of parents in making Project ALERT an effective drug education program is essential.

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Project ALERT Home Learning Opportunities

Core Lessons

Lesson 1: Test Your Drug IQ. Students and parents independently compare their answers and discuss them.

Lesson 5: Parent/Guardian Interview: Peer Pressure. The purpose of this activity is to stimulate home discussion of peer pressure to use drugs and to involve parents in the curriculum.

Lesson 6: Internal Pressure Scenarios. Sharing thought processes with their parents helps student to think things out and opens better lines of communication about important stresses and pressures.

Lesson 8: Oral Report on Inhalant Abuse, Family Evaluation Form. The oral report that students prepare as homework to give to their parents is designed as a tool for encouraging family discussion. The evaluation is not intended to grade or actually evaluate the performance of the student, but rather it's a device to engage the parents in the homework assignment. Many parents are not fully informed about the dangers of inhalants and have an opportunity to learn right along with their child.

Lesson 9: Oral Report on Drugs, Family Evaluation Form. This assignment functions in much the same manner as the inhalant homework in Lesson 8.

Booster Lesson

Lesson 2: Parent/Guardian Questionnaire, Resisting Pressures. A lot changes in the life of an adolescent in one year. This assignment gives parent and students a chance to revisit attitudes and strategies for resisting drugs one year later.

Sample Letter to Parent/Guardian

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Today we started a program called Project ALERT in your son/daughter's class. Project ALERT is an age appropriate substance abuse prevention curriculum proven effective in reducing experimentation among teens, and in reducing usage among teens who experiment.

Project ALERT contains eleven lessons in its initial year that focus on alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and inhalants - those substances that are the first and most widely used by young people today. Project ALERT's focus is on motivating non-use, learning to recognize pressures to use and on developing and practicing skills to resist these pressures.

Our school district is committed to providing the most effective approaches to preventing the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs in our schools and communities. We know that prevention of drug use and abuse is most effective when it is a partnership between the community, the home and the school.

According to a nationwide survey released by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America in April, 1999, youth who learn about the risks of drugs at home from their parents are much less likely to use drugs than those who do not.

However, getting the message across is not easy. According to the Partnership's survey, virtually all parents (98%) reported talking to their kids at some point about drugs, but just 68% of the kids remembered the conversation, and only 27% reported learning a lot at home on the issue of drug use. Here is where the structured home learning opportunities within Project ALERT can help to focus discussion between you and your kids. Your child will be bringing home five homework assignments that will involve you in discussion, sharing responses and listening to oral reports. These Home Learning Opportunities will be for Lessons 1, 5, 6, 8 and 9.

Please be aware that this process and your responses will not be shared in class. These activities provide you an opportunity to communicate with your child about these important issues. If for any reason you are not comfortable with returning your responses to me, I will accept a note from you confirming the assignment has been completed. If you have any questions, please contact me at (enter teacher phone number).

Sincerely,