

# What Does and Does Not Work in Youth Substance Misuse Prevention

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Trends in youth alcohol, cannabis and tobacco use have declined over the past decades, likely in response to effective prevention efforts in the areas, however it is critical for prevention practitioners to continue these efforts as there are an overwhelming number of programs, policies, and practices intended to prevent youth substance misuse to select from. Researchers have evaluated many of these strategies, to understand which do and do not work. Some prevention strategies have been found not to reduce the development of unhealthy behaviors,<sup>1</sup> and in some cases, research has found that some programs can even lead to increased substance misuse or negative behaviors.<sup>2</sup> Continued use of strategies that don’t work can have negative long-term health consequences. This brief summarizes that research evidence, with the goal of helping decision-makers identify and implement strategies with the best chances of success. Then, for communities or organizations that are currently implementing ineffective strategies, we provide three examples of how to shift to strategies that are more likely to benefit youth, families, and communities.

## Characteristics of Effective and Ineffective Strategies for Preventing Youth Substance Misuse

	INEFFECTIVE Strategies <sup>1-7</sup>	EFFECTIVE Strategies <sup>3-7</sup>
<b>WHAT (Content Being Delivered)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>× Use scare tactics or fear-based messages</li> <li>× Focus on substance abstinence</li> <li>× Only provide knowledge about substance use (e.g., drug fact sheet)</li> <li>× Focus on long-term consequences of substance use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Theory-driven</li> <li>✓ Are socioculturally and developmentally relevant</li> <li>✓ Have clear goals and objectives with evidence of impact on targeted outcomes</li> <li>✓ Focus on norms</li> <li>✓ Offer opportunities for social skills practice</li> <li>✓ Promote developing positive relationships</li> <li>✓ Aim to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors</li> <li>✓ Focus on short-term consequences of substance use</li> </ul>
<b>HOW (Delivery Method)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>× Use lectures (passive)</li> <li>× Are punitive</li> <li>× One-time events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Use varied teaching methods</li> <li>✓ Are socioculturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate</li> <li>✓ Are interactive</li> <li>✓ Include peer-led components</li> <li>✓ Target multiple settings/influences (school, family, community)</li> </ul>
<b>WHO (Characteristics of Person Delivering Strategy)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>× Use expert or personal testimony as a primary way to deliver program content</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Are delivered by well-trained program facilitators</li> <li>✓ Provide facilitators with sufficient support and supervision</li> </ul>



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# How Can We Shift from Ineffective to Effective Prevention Strategies?

Effective prevention strategies give participants the best chance of experiencing benefits and lowest chance of experiencing unintended harms while also making responsible use of prevention resources. If your community or organization currently uses ineffective prevention strategies, ask decision-makers why, and together brainstorm changes that would benefit your youth, families, and communities. Here are three examples of shifts from ineffective to effective prevention strategies.

## 1. Instead of strategies that use scare tactics or fear-based messages, try normative messaging regarding substance use.

Ineffective Strategies	Effective Strategies
<p>Strategies that use scare tactics or fear-based messages...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>× Focus on exaggerated dangers and norms (i.e., the behavior, values, or attitudes shared by a group) that dramatize the effects of substance misuse (e.g., sharing statistics of high use) which scare youth into choosing healthy behaviors.<sup>8</sup></li> <li>× Can lead to misperceptions about substance use norms, which can increase participants' use.<sup>9-11</sup></li> </ul> <p><i>Example.</i> The Montana Meth Project<sup>12</sup> is an advertising campaign aimed at reducing youth initiation of methamphetamine use by sensationalizing addiction and its associated effects. Studies found that the campaign did not prevent methamphetamine use.<sup>13-15</sup></p>	<p>Strategies that use normative messaging...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Accurately depict substance use attitudes and behaviors of the target audience.<sup>16</sup></li> <li>✓ Can enhance skills-based programming by increasing awareness of normative peer substance use, and correcting inaccurate beliefs.<sup>5,6,11</sup></li> </ul> <p><i>Example.</i> Project Towards No Drug Abuse (Project TND)<sup>17,18</sup> is a comprehensive substance use prevention curriculum that includes content on correcting drug use myths (i.e., false normative beliefs). Project TND has been found to reduce youth use of cigarettes, cannabis, and alcohol.<sup>6,17</sup></p>

## 2. Instead of focusing on resistance-only training, try skill-building programs.

Ineffective Strategies	Effective Strategies
<p>Resistance-only and/or abstinence-based programs...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>× Focus on substance use resistance training which can have negative impacts when not delivered with other education or skills-based strategies.<sup>2</sup></li> <li>× Teach students to refrain from any substance use without offering any additional skill building.</li> </ul> <p><i>Example.</i> D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) is a school-based prevention program that focuses on teaching youth how to resist peer pressure to experiment with substances.<sup>19</sup> Studies have found D.A.R.E. to have a negligible effect on outcomes.<sup>19</sup></p>	<p>Comprehensive skill-building programs...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Focus on learning specific skills (e.g., self-regulation, social resilience) and target modifiable risk and protective factors, which in turn reduce drug use.<sup>3,20</sup></li> <li>✓ Are delivered across several sessions, which allows for more practice and skill development.<sup>21</sup></li> </ul> <p><i>Example.</i> Positive Action is a program that aims to prevent and reduce substance use by developing social skills.<sup>22,23</sup> Positive Action has been shown to reduce harmful behaviors, including substance misuse.<sup>22</sup></p>

### 3. Instead of one-time events, try multi-session family-based programs.

Ineffective Strategies	Effective Strategies
<p>One-time events targeting youth only (e.g., assemblies, field trips, guest speakers)...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>× Elicit temporary emotional arousal and capture attention in the moment, which does not lead to long term behavior change.<sup>24</sup></li><li>× Are not theory-driven, rely on expert or personal testimony, and are typically structured as lectures without skill practice and other interactive content.<sup>5</sup></li><li>× Focus on long-term consequences of substance use (e.g., death, health complications) rather than more immediate, developmentally appropriate outcomes (e.g., poor peer relationships, academic challenges).<sup>25</sup></li></ul> <p><i>Example.</i> Strategies like mock car crashes or drunk goggles use a simulation experience that can reinforce unhealthy behaviors.<sup>26</sup> Such strategies can also trigger or re-traumatize individuals through the use of graphic images and realistic situations.<sup>8</sup> Personal testimonies may include extreme stories that are developmentally inappropriate and lead to misunderstanding of substance use consequences and norms.<sup>26</sup></p>	<p>Multi-session family-based programs...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Emphasize the importance of caregiving practices and their influence on children's substance use.</li><li>✓ Work to modify and manage emotions and behaviors within the family to improve family interactions and positive parental monitoring.</li><li>✓ Aim to develop problem-solving skills, which build family support and lower the risk of adolescent substance misuse.<sup>27</sup></li><li>✓ Educate families on the risk and protective factors of substance misuse and associated risk-taking behaviors, as well as what protective factors can be modified at home, such as family communication styles.</li></ul> <p><i>Example.</i> Strengthening Families Program (SFP) 10-14 is an interactive community-based program for caregivers and youth that uses varied teaching methods to promote skill building, social connections, family support, social and emotional competence, and youth development knowledge.<sup>27,28</sup> SFP has been shown to prevent substance misuse and other risky behaviors among youth ages 10 to 14.<sup>28</sup></p>

## Resources

For information about evidence-based prevention strategies that work, visit:

- [Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development](#)
- [CASEL Program Guide](#)
- [Crime Solutions](#)
- [Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Evidence-based Programs](#)
- [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#)
- [The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare](#)
- [What Works Clearinghouse](#)
- [Results First Clearinghouse Database](#)
- [Guide to Online Registries for Substance Misuse Prevention Evidence-based Programs and Practices](#)

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