

Study Touts the Benefits of Anti-Drug Curriculum in Junior High

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At a time of widespread skepticism about whether schools can do anything to prevent young people from using drugs, a study released here last week offers some hope.

Researchers at Cornell University Medical College have produced what they say is the first

evidence that an anti-drug curriculum for junior high school students showed long-term benefits. Students who underwent a prevention program taught by regular classroom teachers used less tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana years later than their peers who did not take part in the program, the researchers found.

The six-year study followed

nearly 3,600 New York State students who went through the prevention program, known as life-skills training. By the 12th grade, those students were less likely than the nonparticipants to be serious drug users, both in terms of heavy consumption of a single substance and in the use of multiple drugs.

The research appeared in the April 12 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

While the program curbed drug use among students in the overall sample, the results were particularly striking for the 66 percent of participating students who received what the researchers determined was a more complete version of the intervention program.

For example, among that group:

- Pack-a-day cigarette smoking was 25 to 33 percent lower than among peers who did not undergo the program at all

- Drunkenness (measured by at least one such incident a month) was 23 to 30 percent lower.

- Weekly marijuana use was 44 percent lower.

- Weekly use of cigarettes, alcohol, and tobacco together was two-thirds lower.

The study "provides important

new evidence that a drug-abuse-prevention program conducted during junior high school can produce meaningful and durable reduction in drug use," Gilbert J. Botvin, the study's principal author, told reporters at a news conference here last week.

"These findings are in stark contrast to the prevailing myth that nothing works, ... that prevention is a waste of time and effort," said Mr. Botvin, a professor of public health and psychiatry at Cornell.

"If approaches such as this were widely disseminated and used by schools across the country, it's our estimate that roughly 100,000 lives could be saved each and every year" by reducing the number of smokers alone, he said.

The students in the study were predominantly white and middle class, but other research by the Cornell team found similar positive effects—at least in the short term—for inner-city minority students, Mr. Botvin said.

Review and Reinforcement

The study began in 1985 when 5,954 7th graders in 56 suburban and rural schools around Albany, Syracuse, and Long Island entered the prevention program.

When the students were 12th graders, the researchers tracked down 3,597 of them—about 60 percent of the original group.

At both points, students were asked to report their own drug use and were given breath tests for cigarette smoking.

Schools were randomly assigned to either treatment or control groups, and teachers received a one-day training workshop or were given a two-hour videotape.

Classroom teachers taught the program over the course of 15 class periods in the 7th grade.

Students in the prevention group also received "booster" sessions in the 8th and 9th grades for review and reinforcement.

The program costs about \$8 to \$10 per student per year.

Mr. Botvin cited two key factors that contributed to the program's success: the number and multi-year nature of the lessons, and the kind of lessons given.

The curriculum gave students information and skills for resisting social pressure to use drugs. Through demonstrations and role-playing, students learned not only what to say to refuse drugs but also the tone and body language to use, said Mr. Botvin.