

What Does *Getting Results* Say About Effective Prevention Strategies for Middle School Youths?

Although the basic principles of effective prevention strategies remain constant across all grade levels,¹ the emphasis of the strategies changes as students mature. Middle school represents a critical juncture in the lives of young people. During middle school, children begin to experience many more opportunities to engage in high-risk behaviors. Their orientation moves increasingly away from family and toward their peers. Therefore, middle school is the time to intensify prevention efforts begun in elementary school and build a firm foundation of skills that will prepare students for their lives in high school and beyond.

Middle schools should focus on three important areas: (1) selecting and faithfully implementing a *social influences curriculum* that has been shown to be effective in order to increase students' ability to make good decisions about substance use; (2) creating a *school climate* that enhances students' sense of connectedness to their school; and (3) working with *parents and the community* to offer a consistent, positive message to youngsters about alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use. These approaches may not involve large investments of money, but they do require a conscious and consistent commitment across the school community.

Social Influences Curriculum

Middle school is the prime time for helping youths acquire skills to make good decisions about alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and violence. Research indicates that classroom curricula based on the *social influences* model is most effective at the middle school level. As Phyllis Ellickson explains (see *Getting Results*, Part I, p. 91):

adolescents are especially vulnerable to social pressures. In their desire to put childhood behind them and to appear grown up, they tend to emulate what they perceive as adult behavior, including drinking, smoking, and using drugs. Accordingly, drug education programs based on the social influence model seek to familiarize adolescents with the sources — both internal and external — of pressure to use drugs, to help them counter pro-drug arguments, and to teach them techniques for saying no in pressure situations.

Steve Sussman describes the three main types of lessons that a comprehensive social-influences prevention curriculum should have (see *Getting Results*, Update 2, pp. 39-40):

- **Basic information** lessons address listening/involvement, long- and short-term physical consequences, and decision-making and public commitment.
- **Normative social influence** lessons are designed to change the social norm and teach refusal skills.
- **Informational social influence** lessons attempt to modify prevalence overestimates, raise social awareness of adult and media influences, and increase youth activism through “correcting” ads and writing to policymakers.

Researchers for *Getting Results* have reviewed the evidence of the effectiveness of several curricula grounded in the social influences model. No evidence of effectiveness was found for the popular *Here's Looking at You* program (see *Getting Results*, Update 2, pp. 14-17). For the effective curricula listed below, note that some outcomes include delaying the onset of substance use. This is a valuable outcome because many researchers believe some use of substances during adolescence is normative, but the later it occurs, the better. Note also that no single program is effective with all risk behaviors for all youths. Therefore, it is important to align the curriculum you select with the specific needs of your students.

Note: The *Getting Results* documents may be downloaded at <http://www.gettingresults.org>.

¹ Effective prevention strategies require that schools use science-based classroom curricula that have been demonstrated to be effective; provide a caring environment in which students are expected to meet high expectations; and reinforce the prevention message about alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and violence at school, at home, and in the community.

Curricula Grounded in the Social Influences Model

Program Title	Program Focus	Outcomes and Effectiveness	Getting Results Reference
All Stars	Alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (grades 6–8)	Reductions in the onset of smoking and the prevalence of smoking.	Part II, pp. 60–61
Life Skills Education	Alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and violence (grades 6–8)	Effects on cigarette smoking and alcohol, marijuana, and drug use six years after the program.	Part I, pp. 102–103
Lions-Quest Skills for Adolescence*	Youth development (grades 6–8)	Small but significant delay of initiation of substance use (particularly cigarettes and marijuana) and a delay in transition to additional substances.	Update 2, pp. 24–31
Minnesota Smoking Prevention Project	Tobacco (grades 6–10)	After a five-year intervention, 14.6% of students in program communities were smoking weekly compared with 24.1% in control communities.	Part II, pp. 81–82
Project ALERT	Alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (grades 6–8)	Delayed the initiation of marijuana use among nonusers of marijuana and cigarettes; held down regular marijuana use among prior users; and curbed frequent, heavy smoking among those who had previously experimented with cigarettes. Was less successful in reducing alcohol use and had a negative effect on students who were confirmed smokers in 7th grade.	Part I, pp. 111–112 Part II, pp. 59–60
Project Northland	Alcohol and other drugs (grades 6–8); part of a community-wide program	Decrease in alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use for baseline nondrinkers.	Part I, pp. 112–113
Project STAR (Midwestern Prevention Project)*	Alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (ages ten to twelve); includes community components	Reduction in tobacco and marijuana use. Addition of mass media and community components may enhance the effects of school-based programs.	Part I, pp. 113–114
Project Towards No Tobacco (TNT)	Tobacco (grades 5–8)	Decrease in initial and weekly use of cigarettes.	Part II, pp. 63–66

School Climate

Prevention programs should reduce the risk factors in students' lives **and** increase the factors that protect students. A primary protective factor that schools can address is students' sense of closeness to and connectedness with the school. This factor is measured by whether students feel teachers care about them and are fair and whether they feel a sense of belonging to the school. Researchers for *Getting Results* have reviewed the effectiveness of two programs that affect the school climate for middle school grades; see the table shown below.

School Climate Programs

Program Title	Program Focus	Outcomes and Effectiveness	Getting Results Reference
Project Achieve	Violence prevention and youth development (Pre-K–8); school processes to increase resilience, protective factors, and self-management in youths	Results show that overall disciplinary referrals, suspensions, grade retentions, and special education referrals and placements decreased.	Part I, pp. 130–132
Olweus Bullying Prevention*	Aggressive behavior and bullying (K–8)	Results included reductions in the reported incidence of both bully and victim experiences, reductions in other antisocial behavior at school (vandalism, fighting, theft, and truancy), and improvement in social climate.	Part I, pp. 119–121

Parents and Community

Schools are not the only influence on children. Prevention messages heard in the school need to be reinforced in the community; hence, the increasing importance of comprehensive, multicomponent programs. Project Northland (*Getting Results*, Part I, pp. 112–113) is a community-wide program for preventing the use of alcohol by adolescents. It includes a social-influences school-based curriculum for grades seven and eight, peer participation, parent involvement and education programs, and community task force activities. Project STAR (*Getting Results*, Part I, pp. 113–114) is a school-based program with community components, including parent programs, community leader training, community health policies, and media campaigns.

Another community resource with very positive results for pre-adolescents is the Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentoring program (*Getting Results*, Part I, p. 93). Youths who participated in Big Brothers/Big Sisters were less likely to start using alcohol and other drugs, hit someone, or skip school. They also felt more competent about doing homework, made modest gains in grade point averages, and had improved relationships with both their parents and their peers. Mentoring is a research-based activity that can supplement a school-based program.

* For information on Lions-Quest Skills for Adolescence, Project STAR, or Olweus Bullying Prevention, see <http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov>. For all other programs, see <http://www.californiahealthykids.org>.