

Can schools help to prevent drug use?

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The Bottom Line:

School-based interventions can help to prevent early drug use among youth, which should lead to an overall reduction in substance use and addiction. Evidence from a review of 32 studies suggests that the most effective school-based prevention programs to reduce initial drug use are those based on teaching life skills, such as refusal skills and social skills aimed at helping students combat peer pressure. Programs focused on increasing drug knowledge were not effective in preventing drug use. Others designed to boost self-esteem helped to improve the students' decision making skills and drug knowledge, but increased their use of marijuana.

What problem is being addressed?

Drug addiction is a chronic disease. Experimentation is the most common reason for initial drug use yet the steps from experimentation to abuse and addiction are not known. The best way to prevent drug addiction is to reduce initial drug use. Because initial experimentation with drugs commonly occurs in adolescence, programs delivered in a school setting may hold the most promise for preventing substance abuse and addiction.

What intervention is being tested?

This review looked at three common school-based interventions: knowledge-focused interventions, in which students learn about the biological and psychological effects of drugs; affective-focused interventions aimed at increasing the students' self esteem; and skill-focused interventions that teach refusal skills and social skills to help students combat peer pressure.

Interventions administered by both peers and teachers were included. Some were passive programs, delivered in a lecture format, and some were interactive, involving students in the design and/or delivery of the program.

What is the *real scientific* evidence?

The authors reviewed 32 studies comparing the three interventions. Participants were 46,539 children in Grades 1 through 11, with the majority in Grades 6 and 7. The children were tested for drug use before and after the intervention. Some studies included follow-ups ranging from 1 year to 10 years after the intervention.

The evidence showed that knowledge-focused interventions increased drug knowledge but did not decrease drug use. Skill-focused interventions increased drug knowledge, decision making and self esteem, and also decreased drug use. Students involved in affective-focused interventions improved their decision making skills and drug knowledge but increased their use of marijuana.

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The preceding is a summary of:

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