



New Anti-drug Program Shows 'Phenomenal' Success By Focusing On Positives

05 Mar 2006

A newly-released study suggests that a well-designed in-school and community communication campaign really can dramatically cut marijuana and alcohol use among young teens.

In a study of 32 schools in 16 communities around the country, researchers found that the campaign cut in half the number of students who began using marijuana and alcohol during the two years of the project, compared to students in communities without the program.

"That's a startlingly strong effect," said Michael Slater, principal investigator of the study and professor of communication at Ohio State University.

The campaign included print materials, such as a series of posters, as well as promotional items such as book covers, tray liners, T-shirts, water bottles, rulers and lanyards.

Slater said the success of the campaign was largely due to the sophisticated, well-researched theme, developed over the past 15 years by study co-author Kathleen Kelly, professor of marketing at Colorado State University.

The theme was "Be Under Your Own Influence," which Kelly said speaks to teens' efforts to establish their own identities.

"The campaign slogan elicits positive attitudes about being independent and in control," she said. "It's something teens will listen to because it isn't preachy."

A very similar theme was recently adopted by Office of National Drug Control Policy for its national campaign, which it calls "Above the Influence." Slater served as chair of the advisory expert panel assisting that national campaign in 2003 and part of 2004.

Results of the study will be published in the journal *Health Education Research: Theory and Practice*.

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The study involved 16 small communities in all regions of the United States. In half of the communities, two middle schools received the "Be Under Your Own Influence" campaign. In addition, an area-wide communication effort was made available in these eight communities, mirroring the "Be Under Your Own Influence" theme for the in-school campaign. In these communities, volunteers provided posters to local businesses and organizations, organized anti-drug events, and provided information to the local media, with the goal of reinforcing the in-school communication efforts at the two local schools.

The other half of the communities had no media program of any kind. In addition, half of all participating schools

(both those with and without the media campaign) also offered participating students "All Stars," a well-respected substance-abuse prevention curriculum.

In all, 4,216 students participated. They completed questionnaires that examined their alcohol, cigarette and marijuana use. They were surveyed four times over two years: before the intervention program began, at the end of the first school year, in the fall of the second school year, and late spring of the second year.

Results showed that in communities with the "Be Under Your Own Influence" campaign, only about half as many teens reported taking up use of alcohol or marijuana, compared to teens in communities with no program, during the two years in which the campaign was in the schools. For example, in schools without the media campaign or classes, over more than 20 percent of the students reported having tried alcohol and/or marijuana. But in schools with the media campaign and curriculum the percentages were just slightly more than 10 percent.

Each of the different treatments - media and curriculum - appeared to have independent effects on lowering drug and alcohol use, Slater said. As expected, substance use was lowest in schools where both the media and the curriculum programs were in place. But the media programs had a larger impact than did the school curriculum.

"A media program has an advantage in that it can stay in the environment in an ongoing way. Students take a course, but after it is over its influence starts to fade," Slater said.

The media-based program appeared to reduce both alcohol and marijuana use; effects were especially clear cut with respect to marijuana.

"These multi-substance approaches are particularly advantageous given the limited resources and time available in most schools to devote to substance-abuse prevention messages," Slater said.

Kelly said the researchers were surprised by the "phenomenal success" of this campaign and, as a result, are continuing similar research projects to see if the effects can be replicated and improved.

Part of the reason for the campaign's success may be that the theme resonated with youth and stressed positive reasons to avoid drugs.

"Strong fear appeals regarding alcohol and marijuana, we've learned over the years, are typically not effective with teens," she said. When campaigns focus on the negative consequences of drug and alcohol use, it may cause some teens to think about friends who have used drugs or alcohol with no obvious problems, which can hurt the credibility of the message.

"Our campaign instead used messages that appeal to what teens aspire to achieve," Kelly said.

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The study was supported by a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA).

Contact: Michael Slater, (614) 247-8762; Slater.59@osu.edu

Written by Jeff Grabmeier, (614) 292-8457; Grabmeier.1@osu.edu

Contact: Michael Slater
Slater.59@osu.edu
[Ohio State University](#)

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