

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF PREVENTION

The Texas Summit Committee (a group of individuals in key policy making and planning positions committed to finding solutions to the drug abuse crisis in Texas) provides the following description of prevention:

**"Prevention" means constructive methods or programs designed to preclude the use of alcohol, inhalants, and other illegal drugs by youth, to reduce the risk of adults' abusing alcohol or becoming alcohol dependent, and to preclude the use of inhalants and illegal drugs by adults.**

- The focus of prevention is wellness.
- Prevention dispels the attitude that the drug problem is hopeless and inevitable by conveying the belief that communities can reverse the tide of chemical abuse and dependency.
- Prevention provides a clear vision of a drug-free environment and well-defined methods on how best to achieve that environment.
- Prevention is a positive, pro-active approach that creates values and norms for the individual and the community that makes socially unacceptable the illegal use of alcohol and other drugs.
- Prevention offers strategies, techniques, and programs to effectively solve the drug-abuse problem.
- Prevention educates, enlightens, and gives responsibility to the individual and the community, providing new opportunities for total well-being.

## SHARING AND PROMOTING A COMMON PREVENTION LANGUAGE

There is general agreement among prevention practitioners on the overall goal of prevention. It is to foster a climate in which:

- Alcohol use is acceptable only for those of legal age and only when the risk of adverse consequences is minimal;
  - Prescription and over-the-counter drugs are used only for the purposes for which they were intended;
  - Other abusable substances (e.g., gasoline or aerosols) are used only for their intended purposes; and
  - Illegal drugs are not used at all.
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## PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Prevention strategies targeting youth have evolved over the past 20 years as evaluation research reveals more about what works. Several strategies are used effectively, especially in combination:

- **Information dissemination.** This strategy provides awareness and knowledge of the nature and extent of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, abuse, and addiction and their effects on individuals, families, and communities, as well as information to increase perceptions of risk. It also provides knowledge and awareness of prevention policies, programs, and services. It helps set and reinforce norms (for example, underage drinking and drug dealers will not be tolerated in this neighborhood).
  - **Prevention education.** This strategy aims to affect critical life and social skills, including decision making, refusal skills, critical analysis (for example, of media messages), and systematic and judgmental abilities.
  - **Alternatives.** This strategy provides for the participation of targeted populations in activities that exclude alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use by youth. Constructive and healthy activities offset the attraction to, or otherwise meet the needs usually filled by, alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use.
  - **Problem identification and referral.** This strategy calls for identification, education, and counseling for those youth who have indulged in age-inappropriate use of tobacco products or alcohol, or who have indulged in the first use of illicit drugs. Activities under this strategy would include screening for tendencies toward substance abuse and referral for preventive treatment for curbing such tendencies.
  - **Community-based process.** This strategy aims to enhance the ability of the community to provide prevention and treatment services to alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use disorders more effectively. Activities include organizing, planning, enhancing efficiency and effectiveness of services implementation, interagency collaboration, coalition building, and networking. Building healthy communities encourages healthy lifestyle choices.
  - **Environmental approach.** This strategy sets up or changes written and unwritten community standards, codes, and attitudes--influencing incidence and prevalence of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use problems in the general population. Included are laws to restrict availability and access, price increases, and community-wide actions.
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## PREVENTION PROGRAM PLANNING

- Prevention programs should be designed to enhance "protective factors" and move toward reversing or reducing known "risk factors."
- Prevention programs should target all forms of drug abuse, including the use of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and inhalants.
- Prevention programs should include skills to resist drugs when offered, strengthen personal commitments against drug use, and increase social competency (e.g., in communications, peer relationships, self-efficacy, and assertiveness), in conjunction with reinforcement of attitudes against drug use.
- Prevention programs for adolescents should include interactive methods, such as peer discussion groups, rather than didactic teaching techniques alone.
- Prevention programs should include a parents' or caregivers' component that reinforces what the children are learning—such as facts about drugs and their harmful effects—and that opens opportunities for family discussions about use of legal and illegal substances and family policies about their use.
- Prevention programs should be long-term, over the school career with repeat interventions to reinforce the original prevention goals. For example, school-based efforts directed at elementary and middle school students should include booster sessions to help with critical transitions from middle to high school.
- Family-focused prevention efforts have a greater impact than strategies that focus on parents only or children only.
- Community programs that include media campaigns and policy changes, such as new regulations that restrict access to alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs, are more effective when they are accompanied by school and family interventions.
- Community programs need to strengthen norms against drug use in all drug abuse prevention settings, including the family, the school, and the community.
- Schools offer opportunities to reach all populations and also serve as important settings for specific subpopulations at risk for drug abuse, such as children with behavior problems or learning disabilities and those who are potential dropouts.
- Prevention programming should be adapted to address the specific nature of the drug abuse problem in the local community.
- The higher the level of risk of the target population, the more intensive the prevention effort must be and the earlier it must begin.
- Prevention programs should be age-specific, developmentally appropriate, and culturally sensitive.
- Effective prevention programs are cost-effective. For every dollar spent on drug use prevention, communities can save 4 to 5 dollars in costs for drug abuse treatment and counseling.

### **RULES OF THUMB FOR DEVELOPING PREVENTION STRATEGIES**

1. **Issues divide and tasks unite.** The process in engaging key allies can bring about new alliances and new experiences in cooperation.
2. **Use a rifle approach rather than a shotgun approach.** It is more effective to be successful in a limited area than to dissipate resources in the pursuit of vague goals.
3. **Engage only as many people as needed to accomplish the goals of a prevention strategy.** A well designed prevention strategy will include a clear delineation of the required tasks and the human resources needed to carry out those tasks.

### **POSITIVE VALUES UNDERGIRDING PREVENTION ACTIVITY**

- **People can become responsible, within realistic limits, for shaping the conditions under which they live, work, learn, use their leisure and otherwise spend their time.**
  - **People are their own best resources for bringing about change which is important to them.**
  - **Participation by people in shaping the conditions that affect them promotes ownership and vested interest in the change being sought and increases commitment to seeing that the change is achieved and maintained.**
  - **It is desirable to promote change through the use of the existing human, physical and financial resources of the community.**
  - **Prevention is essentially a local activity that focuses upon local conditions and concerns that affect people locally.**
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