

Summary of the design of the **NARCONON™** drug abuse prevention curriculum for high school students

This summary is intended to provide a non-technical synopsis of the detailed description of the Narconon drug abuse prevention program written by Lennox and Cecchini 2007. The full paper places the Narconon prevention approach in the context of relevant scientific and drug abuse prevention literature, including peer-reviewed citations, and covers considerable detail about the program and its content. The following document was created for ease of use by the non-technical reader. It is recommended that the Lennox-Cecchini paper be read in its entirety. – Editor, ABLE International

The problem:

Illicit drug and alcohol use is a staggering problem in today's society. The annual, benchmark study known as Monitoring the Future (MTF)¹ estimates that 13 million youths aged 12-17 become involved with alcohol, tobacco and other drugs annually. MTF results since 1975 show that the prevalence of substance use among young people in the U.S. remains high compared with the declining trend seen during the 1980's; a trend that ended in 1992.

Particularly alarming is the 212 percent increase in the number of 12- to 17-year olds abusing controlled prescription drugs between 1992 and 2003². The landmark report "Under the Counter: The Diversion and Abuse of Controlled Prescription Drugs in the U.S." by the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University shows that the number of Americans who abuse controlled prescription drugs nearly doubled from 7.8 million to 15.1 million from 1992 to 2003. Controlled prescription drugs (like OxyContin, Valium and Ritalin) are now the fourth most abused substance in America behind only marijuana, alcohol and tobacco. Hundreds of peer-reviewed studies detail the negative consequences abuse of substances has on youth development and behavior.

We must quickly address all the factors in society leading to these abhorrent trends. Most experts agree that a coordinated effort starting with individual decisions that are reinforced by social behavior of peers, families, in schools, communities and workplaces is essential to combat these myriad – and often subtle – pro-drug influences. Additionally, we must work to get appropriate guidelines written into policy that reduce the prevalence of pro-drug influences.

An overview of the solution:

It is well established that preventing or delaying initiation of alcohol or other drug use during early adolescence can reduce or prevent substance abuse and other risk behaviors later in adolescence and into adulthood. Accordingly governments, schools and social programs invest substantial resources in school and community based prevention programs.

It is generally recognized that effective prevention strategies increase youth competency and ability; increase youth connectedness to families, school, and communities; and provide roles for parents and caring adults in not only decreasing risk factors but also in enhancing youth development and opportunities. An important factor in preventing substance use/abuse is the

¹ Monitoring the Future: Overview of key findings 2006.
<http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/overview2006.pdf> (accessed May 2007)

² National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University (2005)
http://www.casacolumbia.org/absolutenm/articlefiles/380-under_the_counter_-_diversion.pdf (accessed May 2007)

perception of whether or not that behavior is socially acceptable as well as an understanding of the risks. The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) outlines six prevention strategies that are used to reduce risk and enhance pro-survival factors:

- Information Dissemination – characterized by one-way communication between and source and an audience, such as audiovisual materials, displays, and publications;
- Education – which is based on knowledge-developing activities and interactions with the information and skills of a subject, such as decision making, refusal skills, assertiveness and making friends;
- Alternatives – a strategy that develops youth activities, often with positive role models or to provide opportunities during after school hours;
- Problem Identification and Referral – generally targeted to individuals engaged in risk behaviors;
- Community-Based Processes – particularly the development of collaborations between different agencies and community groups;
- Environmental Approaches – the written and unwritten standards and codes of conduct of society, including laws as well as communicated values.

The education strategy is commonly a curriculum program created by an outside developer. Some programs are designed to be taught by teachers, others by facilitators such as local police or drug counselors. Most of these programs are designed to inform the students of the risk of substance abuse and to enhance their social and decision-making skills to resist pressure from peers and others to use drugs.

Historical context, theory and evidence base for the Narconon™ drug prevention program

The current Narconon high school drug abuse prevention curriculum is an educational strategy that evolved over a 30-year history of interaction between Narconon drug prevention specialists and students, educators, scientists, former users who effectively addressed their addictions, as well as professionals trained in drug rehabilitation technologies including the Narconon drug rehabilitation methodologies based on the research and writings of L. Ron Hubbard. Curriculum components are drawn from diverse scientific fields including toxicology, biochemistry, nutrition, and addiction medicine; they also draw on social psychology processes and product marketing theory.

In its early decades, the Narconon drug abuse prevention program consisted a series of age group-specific presentations aimed at supplementing and further illustrating materials covered in school curricula. Motivational speakers utilized a “communication persuasion” model and included opportunities for interaction in the context of an individual presentation. The theory of communication persuasion is, basically, to be affective an educator must get and hold the listeners’ attention, must be understandable (comprehension), must elicit acceptance on the part of the person exposed to the message (yielding), the acceptance must be retained over time (retention), and thereby be translated into action in appropriate situations. Communication persuasion theory was the first demonstrated effective prevention strategy, shown to reduce cigarette smoking during the 1980s, and underlies most modern prevention programs. It was used in the original supplemental sessions created by Narconon program developers and is fundamental to each module designed into the current curriculum.

Narconon drug education specialists collect written feedback from students, educators and other attendees in the form of short essays that also provide an opportunity to reflect on their decisions and attitudes regarding drug use. An evaluation of these post-program surveys, published in 1995³, found that the format was engaging; the information communicated was received and appreciated, and resulted in heightened perceptions of risk – including a shift in attitude among the borderline group of students who held the view that they might use drugs in the future. Eighty six percent of the students in this category stated that the session they had attended changed their mind; most stating that they were now more concerned about the effects of drugs or that they had not realized that drugs were so damaging.

Additional to the classroom based supplemental presentations, the network also developed programs to train school peer leaders, teachers and parents. It also developed after-school programs, programs for youth groups, programs for high risk youth, and a variety of multi-media teaching resources. According to program executives, Narconon staff have educated over 1.5 million school children

To have an effect, persuasive communication normally improves knowledge and perceptions in a very specific area; therefore, a presentation would typically be limited to a single substance or idea, changing decisions around that substance only. This leaves other substances under-addressed and, when pro-drug influences for those substances become prevalent, increased use is likely.

For this reason, in 2004, the Narconon network utilized its compiled survey data, in combination with best-practices data on school-based programs to expand its supplemental sessions into an eight-module high school curriculum, with the opportunity for booster sessions in subsequent years. The series of five to eight weekly lessons may be delivered by professional facilitators or by trained teachers, is supported by teaching materials and a series of drug education videos or DVDs. All content is presented with age-appropriate vocabulary and style and emphasizes student participation. The Narconon network has created training materials to help the facilitator develop the ability to implement the program according to specific standards and maintain the fidelity of the program.

Overview of the Narconon™ drug education curriculum for high school grades

The Narconon prevention program's goal – to prevent and ultimately eliminate drug abuse in society – aligns with the goals and public health agenda of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). To meet these objectives, the Narconon drug prevention curriculum incorporates a unique combination of prevention strategies. Primarily an education model based on social influence theory, the classroom-based curriculum has the objective of giving youth vital information and tools they will need to make their own decision to keep away from drugs.

The drug abuse prevention literature emphasizes how social factors play a major role in the initiation and early stages of youth drug use. Further, this body of literature states that such factors must be addressed for youth prevention programs to be effective and recognizes the importance of providing information about drugs and drug abuse as a component of effective prevention.

³ Beckmann S and Chapman S. Narconon Drug Education Program: A Preliminary Analysis. U.S. Department of Education, Educational Resource Information. 1995 <http://www.eric.ed.gov/> accessed May 2007 keyword Narconon

The Narconon program incorporates techniques to increase awareness of these social factors, expose sources of false information, and replace that false information with true data. By way of a simplified example, if the often advertised perception of cigarette smoking as physically attractive were replaced conceptually with the true effects smoking has on physical performance, fewer youth (who valued physical performance in this example) would smoke. In this way it is the aim of Narconon program developers to purposefully encourage students to arrive at their own conclusions regarding the data presented. The program has components aimed at improving each individual's ability to:

- effectively detect and resist social pressures;
- correct the misconception that alcohol, tobacco and other drug use is a socially normative or acceptable behavior;
- provide opportunities for program participants to formulate their own concepts of acceptable behavior;
- understand the immediate physiological effects of substances and how their use can interfere with achieving their goals in life;
- foster pro-survival communication about drug use among peers and family members.

This approach necessitates a reliance on realistic analogies that integrate a wide body of published scientific data. It must avoid “scare tactics” – an approach broadly recognized to be counterproductive – and restore student ability to evaluate information.

Two critical drug-related attitudes move in correlation with consumption – perception of risk (how risky consumers view a particular drug) and perception of social disapproval (consumer appeal and acceptance of a particular drug). Constant media and marketing appearances of drugs and alcohol decrease risk perception and social disapproval while promising solutions to everyday desires.

Throughout the curriculum modules, students are given the opportunity to clarify the conflicting and often false drug messages they are bombarded by daily, such as “alcohol and marijuana are ‘soft’ drugs whereas cocaine and heroin are ‘hard drugs,’” or “prescribed medications are ‘good’ drugs whereas illicit drugs are ‘bad.’” Researchers have argued that such illogical statements lead youth to feel that there are ‘double standards’ being applied throughout society which can be a barrier to the effectiveness of the drug abuse prevention message.

Inability to evaluate the accuracy of data and communicate well with parents or peers prevents intelligent decisions regarding substance use. Accordingly, the Narconon curriculum includes strategies to facilitate youth awareness and knowledge and communicate on the subject of drugs..

The Narconon™ prevention curriculum modules

Session 1: “Drugs and The Body”

The objective of this session is to relay the message that drugs and their metabolites are among the many lipophilic compounds that move from the bloodstream into a number of body tissues. Drugs and their metabolites can be retained for a period of time contributing to the accumulated body stores of toxins and causing unwanted health effects.

Take Home Assignment

Session 2: “What is a Drug?”

The objective of this session is to provide a definition of a drug and begin discussion of the physical effects of drugs. By the end of this session students should understand several generalizable adverse effects.

Session 3: Review

Session three is an assessment/review session including group discussion and practical activities to reinforce and clarify the previous two sessions.

Session 4: “Ecstasy – The Real Story”

The objective of this session is increased awareness of the many ways drugs are promoted to youths, exposing sources that stand to gain financially from promotional messages and replacing those messages with pro-survival social norms. The session also provides information about the effects of drugs on the mind, using Ecstasy as an example.

Session 5: “Alcohol, Drugs and the Media”

This objective of this session is to further explore how drugs are promoted to youth, particularly the volume of alcohol and cigarette advertisements – often subtly placed – and strengthen pro-survival social norms regarding these substances. This session also reviews how alcohol is made and the adverse effects resulting from its use.

Take Home Assignment

Session 6: Review

This is an assessment/review session including group discussion and hands-on activities to further explore the use of positioning by the media and other influential groups to increase a favorable perception of drugs. This session also reviews how the mind does and does not work when drugs are introduced to their systems

Session 7 “Goals and the Emotional Scale”

The main objective of this session is to show how drugs affect a person’s emotions. While drugs may provide a short-term means of sensation seeking, setting and achieving personal goals results in stable long-term satisfaction.

Session 8: “Setting and Achieving Goals”

The main objective of this session is to further help students see the importance of setting goals in their lives, and a recap on the entire prevention program.

Conclusions

Evolving out of the social influences model and utilizing interactive teaching strategies, the Narconon drug prevention curriculum provides an opportunity for youth to inspect conflicting messages regarding drugs and substance abuse and to draw their own conclusions. It provides them with science-based data upon which to develop their understandings of the impact of drugs and includes practical exercises and discussions to enable them to evaluate and incorporate this information. The program incorporates opportunities for communication with peers, family and

community members so as to enhance protective factors and increase social competencies. Finally, by reviewing and exposing the often subtle pro-drug advertising and other messages that are aimed at increasing tobacco, alcohol and other drug consumption, the Narconon program affords a forum for youth to work out what are correct and pro-survival norms.

In these ways, the Narconon high school drug abuse prevention curriculum incorporates key elements both from its 30 year history of drug abuse prevention presentations and from the growing literature concerning the elements necessary for such programs to be effective. The Narconon drug abuse prevention program stands as a strong approach working to prevent and ultimately eliminate drug abuse in society.