

Help Make Your Community Drug Free

By John Phillips

Simple messages. Plain talk.

They aren't complex plans, but they are what is working for community groups in their efforts to fight drug use in their towns.

In Connecticut, the Connecticut Communities for Drug-Free Youth is a statewide organization that fosters a drug-free environment for children and teens. For over twenty years, CCDFY has supported and promoted prevention programs that are science-based and accessible to families, schools, and community leaders. CCDFY has partnered with established professionals in the parenting education, prevention, and treatment fields to create and administrate effective alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drug use prevention initiatives.

In a recent survey of youth, it was reported that by 8th grade:

- 46 percent of children have used alcohol
- 28 percent have smoked cigarettes
- 23 percent have used illegal drugs

And by 12th grade:

- 77 percent have used alcohol
- 54 percent have smoked cigarettes
- 51 percent have used illegal drugs

To combat this growing trend, CCDFY has introduced a new, statewide effort dedicated to helping parents prevent their children from using alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs. The Parent Corps in Connecticut is modeled on the same principles as the Peace Corps, it harnesses the power of parents working together to keep their children drug-free. The Parent Corps recruits, trains, certifies, and pays full-time salaries to Parent Leaders for two years of service. It institutionalizes the parent movement of the late 1970s into the early 1990s. That movement proved it could change social norms and get results, cutting past-month drug use by two-thirds among adolescents and young adults. Working in their children's school and community, parent leaders provide parents with science-based drug prevention education, hands-on tools, and a peer network that supports parents in their mission to keep their children healthy and drug-free. They form parent groups to support each other as they take action.

In rural Kendallville, Indiana, there is no large corporate sponsor to pick up the tab for an anti-drug program. But that's not stopping the Drug Free Noble County Coalition from coming up with ways to encourage local young people to just say no.

The Noble County group has found ways to work with local independent merchants committed to making life safer and healthier for their neighbors. The coalition identifies

its prime goal as the education of the community about the dangers and serious consequences of substance abuse.

One way the group seeks to spread the word is through a holiday “messaging” program. On various holidays, the coalition prints small cards and garners the cooperation of local merchants to distribute the cards to their customers.

- On Mother's Day, moms receiving corsages and bouquets from their loved ones also get a card saying "Talk to your kids and grandkids about the dangers of drugs."
- Nervous boys renting tuxedos find a message in the pocket of their jackets reminding them to "Have a sober prom."
- During the month of December, local grocery stores pack recipe cards for "mocktails" (non-alcoholic party drinks) into their customers' grocery bags.

One state over, the Coalition for a Drug Free Greater Cincinnati is targeting parents in an effort to get the message to young people about the dangers of drugs. Coalition member Paul Zimmerman, a market researcher for Procter & Gamble, volunteered to use his "day job" skills to create and administer a questionnaire in 1999 that surveyed 47,000 middle- and high school students in schools in the Cincinnati area. The goal of the survey was to find out—from the kids themselves—about their use of drugs, alcohol and tobacco.

This study, now viewed by many as a model tool for measuring the pulse of youth drug use, revealed the following findings in its report of survey results in the year 2000.

- Students whose parents talk to them about drug and alcohol use are 25% less likely to use these drugs regularly than students whose parents don't discuss these issues.
- Students whose parents set clear and consistent rules for them are 46% less likely to use drugs regularly than students without rules to follow.
- Students who have been exposed to anti-drug messages on TV or radio are 40% less likely to use drugs regularly than students who have not been exposed to this form of messaging.

The survey numbers speak loud and clear: The problem of drug use among kids has a powerful antidote, a partial remedy, right there in kids' homes. It's called parent/youth communication.

Armed with the irrefutable evidence that both talking to kids and exposing them to anti-drug messages make a significant difference, the Parent/Youth Task Force of the Coalition for a Drug Free Greater Cincinnati planned its work for the year. One clear and simple idea - talk to your kids - became the message of an extensive social marketing campaign undertaken by the coalition.

The coalition launched its Strong Voices, Smart Choices program in October 2001, with a centerpiece booklet titled The Parents' Guide To Talking With Kids About Drugs. Over

150,000 copies of the guide were distributed throughout ten counties in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky. To promote use of the booklet, and help get it into the hands of as many local parents as possible, the coalition acquired an impressive list of cooperating partners.

- Cincinnati Bell distributed 650,000 bill stuffers that offer "parenting tips" for talking to kids.
- CVS and Kroger pharmacies distributed the guide to customers filling prescriptions in their stores.
- The Cincinnati Academy of Medicine, a physicians group, arranged for member pediatricians to offer the guide to parents.
- A local TV station produced and aired public service announcements about the campaign.
- More than 60,000 "parenting tips fact sheets" for talking with kids were distributed in employee paychecks at local companies throughout Greater Cincinnati.

For more ideas on how your community can launch a campaign against drug use, visit the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America's website at www.cadca.org.

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