The Sexual Abuse Free Environment for Teens™ (SAFE-T) Program

Program Description

Overview:

The SAFE-T Program is a skills-based violence prevention and health education curriculum designed by Prevent Child Abuse Vermont specifically for middle school communities.

The goal of the SAFE-T Program is to prevent sexual victimization and promote healthy relationships and behaviors in adolescents. The program consists of a Teacher’s Guide, Student Workbook, Student Journal and SAFE-T Video used in conjunction with the curriculum.

The Curriculum:

The SAFE-T Program’s ten curriculum units are structured around helping youth identify those factors that put them at risk for being hurt and for hurting others, as well as developing protective factors and enhancing resilience. Factors identified as influencing whether adolescents make healthy or unhealthy choices—particularly in the areas of harassment, sexual abuse, bullying, violence and substance/alcohol use—include empathy, communication skills, coping skills, peer pressure, stereotyping, self-esteem, accountability, thinking errors/cognitive misattributions and drug and alcohol use. Research findings indicate that preventive interventions are best directed at risk and protective factors, rather than categorical problem behaviors; efforts focused on reduction of interacting risk factors may have direct effects on diverse outcomes (Greenberg, Domitrovich, and Bumbarger, 1999).

SAFE-T is a highly experiential and interactive curriculum that utilizes multiple instructional approaches. Classroom activities are developmentally appropriate, participatory, and inclusive, using structured group activities to introduce program content and promote skill acquisition. Such activities have been found to be most effective in working with younger adolescents, providing opportunities for bonding with peers as they collectively participate in acquiring knowledge and practicing new skills (Tobler & Stratton, 1997; Dusenbury, Falco & Lake, 1997).

Approach to Prevention:

Students practice these skills with their peers from three perspectives: that of potential victim, perpetrator and bystander. The role of the bystander has been given significant attention in recent studies, particularly as it relates to two areas. The first area is the recognition of the significant harmful effects, emotionally, socially and academically, on the child who is the witness to problematic behavior, and may be only indirectly involved. The second area of focus has been on the role of the bystander in influencing or allowing harmful behavior to occur – the critical signal provided by the behavior of the bystander to those involved as to whether or not this behavior will be tolerated. Researchers emphasize the critical importance of addressing the role of the bystander in prevention curricula (Dusenbury, et al., 1997).
Effective prevention programs reinforce learning in various settings (home, school, and community) to promote generalization and the likelihood that new skills will become well-established parts of the individual’s repertoire (See Dusenbury, et al., 1997). The SAFE-T Program’s comprehensive approach involves the entire school, parents, and the community:

- **Parent involvement**—cited as critical in prevention and resilience research—is promoted through parent workshops and teen-adult dialogue assignments that are completed throughout the duration of the program (See Dusenbury et al., 1997; Hawkins, J.D., Catalano, R.F., & Miller, J.Y., 1992; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Wills & Cleary, 1996; and Resnick, M.D., Bearman, P.S., & Blum, R.W., 1997 for research citing parental/family involvement as a risk and protective factors related to various harmful behaviors).

- **School Community** – The SAFE-T Program incorporates trainings for teachers, administrators, and support staff involved in the instruction of the curriculum. SAFE-T also works to provide training for the entire school staff in understanding and responding to sexual and problematic behavior in adolescents. Providing training and support to school faculty promotes an inclusive and safe school environment for all where healthy development is fostered (See Dahlberg, 1998; Resnick, et al., 1997; and Baumrind, 1987 for the role that school climate and attachment to school play in influencing adolescent behavior).

- **Community Resources** – Representatives from community agencies involved in supporting families and adolescents make classroom presentations, facilitate small group discussions and assist students with projects (See Masten, 1998; and Hawkins & Catalano, 1992 for the important role that attachment to community and knowledge of and access to resources play in influencing adolescent behavior).

**Historical Background:**

*Prevent Child Abuse Vermont* (PCAV) developed the SAFE-T Program for middle school students in response to Vermont statistics indicating that 41% of the reported cases of sexual abuse involved perpetrators under the age of 20, half of whom were between the ages of 10 and 14 years old. A national and statewide review of other curricula found there were no programs available that addressed both perpetrator and victimization prevention. There are other programs that address issues of violence, including sexual violence; however, we are not aware of other programs that are as comprehensive as SAFE-T, both in terms of the level of involvement obtained from school staff, community agencies and parents and with respect to the breadth of risk and protective factors addressed. In addition, other programs are typically targeted to an older age group and are shorter in duration. SAFE-T provides thirty hours of classroom instruction, meeting the threshold required for achieving meaningful results in the long-term.
REFERENCES


