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Abstract

A major issue in rural counties is substance misuse. USU Extension implemented a substance prevention program with youth in rural counties. The program included family- and school-based education activities to promote youth resilience and development. Evaluation results showed youth exhibited strong anti-drug attitudes after the program.

Introduction

While Utah has comparatively low rates of alcohol and tobacco use, the state ranked seventh in the nation in 2015 for drug overdose deaths. The majority of overdose deaths were related to opioid misuse (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2016). From 2010 to 2015, Utah experienced a 400% increase in deaths due to the misuse of prescription drugs (Violence and Injury Prevention Program, 2014). Utah State University (USU) Extension is actively working in Emery, San Juan, and Wayne counties of Utah to address the opioid epidemic. Counties were strategically selected based on substance misuse rates; in 2014, one of the target counties had more than two times the national rate of opioid deaths per 100,000 (SAMHSA, 2014). In 2019, USU Extension partnered with Iowa State University to utilize the PROSPER delivery framework for a substance prevention program to youth. Intended outcomes of this program are to facilitate positive youth development skills, reduce youth at risk for substance misuse, and reduce opioid misuse among youth.

Response and Target Audience

Desired program outcomes are dependent on a variety of educational activities focused on substance misuse prevention, behavioral health awareness, positive youth development, family skill-building, and sponsored participation in local 4-H programs. The PROSPER framework and the 4-H Thriving Model served as the guiding approach for program implementation and delivery. The PROSPER delivery framework is a nationally-recognized and evidence-based approach to implementing substance prevention programs to 6th and 7th grade youth (PROSPER Partnerships, n.d.), and the 4-H Thriving Model targets positive youth development. The program includes a series of family- and school-based education activities that promote resiliency and developmental strengths for middle-school aged youth. Main activities of the program are delivery of the Botvin LifeSkills Training to middle school students, delivery of the Strengthening Families program to parents in the program, and guided enrollment of student participants to their respective local 4-H program. While COVID-19 impacted implementation, USU Extension has adapted virtual programming to rural youth and families. To date, the LifeSkills component of the program has been delivered to 7th graders in Wayne county ($n = 40$) and Emery county ($n = 41$). The Strengthening Families component was delivered virtually to four families.

Outcomes and Impact

An exit survey was used to evaluate the short-term outcomes of the program. Evaluation results indicated after completing the LifeSkills training, 7th grade students demonstrated highly positive anti-drug ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 0.33$), anti-smoking ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 0.32$), and anti-drinking ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 0.37$) attitudes. Students also expressed strong drug refusal skills ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.67$). A correlational analysis showed strong positive correlations between all anti-drug sentiments, indicating an individual was likely to exhibit anti-drug, anti-smoking, and anti-drinking attitudes simultaneously after participation in the training. After completion, over 70% of youth participants strongly agreed they would not smoke a cigarette, drink alcohol, smoke marijuana, use cocaine or other drugs, use prescription drugs that were prescribed to others, and vape or smoke an e-cigarette. ANOVA analysis revealed anti-drug, anti-smoking, anti-drinking, and drug refusal skills were consistent across gender, race, age, and number of parents in the household. This suggests the program led to positive short-term outcomes for all youth participants regardless of their demographic background.

Public Value

USU Extension aims to provide responsive and relevant programming to meet the needs of audiences across the state of Utah. A major documented problem is the prevalence of substance misuse in rural counties. In response, USU Extension implemented the PROSPER framework to provide a nationally recognized substance misuse prevention program in three rural counties. The program targeted 7th grade youth, and activities included prevention science through PROSPER and positive youth development guided by the 4-H Thriving model. Evaluation results showed youth participants exhibited strong anti-drug attitudes after the program. Positive outcomes were consistent across youth demographic characteristics, indicating all youth benefited from the program irrespective of their personal background. Positive youth development and strong drug-refusal attitudes are necessary to curbing the upward trajectory of substance misuse rates in rural counties. This program serves as an effective model for non-formal interventions targeting drug prevention among youth vulnerable to the opioid epidemic.

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