

Linking Health to Learning Preventing Tobacco Use: Speak Up, Speak Out

When it comes to preventing tobacco use, our voices matter. During March and April, youth and adults involved in tobacco use prevention will be making our voices heard here in the Essex area and statewide. Despite large decreases in youth smoking rates in recent years, many students still believe that a majority of teens smoke. The reality is that 84% of Vermont teens don't smoke.

So, to help change the misperception about the real percentage of youth smokers, the Vermont Department of Health created the "8 out of 10" campaign (www.8outof10.com). Maybe you've already seen public service announcements talking about 8 out of 10 – or 84%, rounded down – on TV or in print advertising. 84% is significantly higher than the 69% of students who reported not smoking in 1999. Through national, statewide and local efforts, the number of youth smokers in Vermont has been reduced by almost half (from 31% to 16%)!

In Essex, schools and community organizations are joining our voices with schools and communities across the state to participate in the 8 out of 10 Campaign. The goal is to raise awareness that most of our youth are choosing not to smoke or use spit tobacco products (like chewing tobacco). Vermont youth are also joining in. Teens in middle schools are involved in Vermont Kids Against Tobacco (VKAT). High school youth participate in Our Voices Xposed (OVX). Both of these groups are active locally at ADL and Essex Middle Schools. Essex CHIPS supports an OVX group.

In Vermont, each school district receives a grant from the Vermont Department of Education to help fund tobacco prevention education, events and programs, including cessation programs to help current youth smokers quit. Here in Essex and Westford, we are lucky to have Essex CHIPS working to prevent tobacco use and engage youth and our whole community in this effort. CHIPS has a grant to promote effective tobacco use prevention strategies and coordinate with school-based efforts. At Chittenden Central Supervisory Union Schools (Westford, Essex Junction, Essex High School, and the Center for Technology Education – CTE), we are using our funds to address youth tobacco use in a variety of ways:

- Offer the NOT (Not On Tobacco) cessation program to youth smokers/chewers;
- Provide evidence-based prevention education to students in grades K-8
- Support youth leadership programs, like OVX and VKAT
- Enforce a strong no-use policy on school grounds
- Coordinate tobacco use prevention activities and education in all CCSU member schools

Advocacy can be a powerful way of making our voices heard and to change policy. What about the power of our voices with our children, our parents and our peers? Do our voices matter? We often hear about alcohol, tobacco and other drug (ATOD) use in terms of numbers. Alarming statistics are what most commonly make the news. It can be frustrating, especially to parents of middle and high school aged youth; to learn about the dangers and challenges that face our children, but not learn about constructive steps we can take to help them make healthy choices around ATOD use. We might wonder if we really affect our teenagers' choices. Studies and surveys are showing that we do.

For example, in a 2001 study of Vermont teens by researchers at Dartmouth University, the youths who indicated their parents would disapprove of their tobacco use were less than half as likely to become established smokers, compared to those who did not think their parents would strongly disapprove. This held true no matter whether or not the parents were smokers themselves. Though we often feel our words fall on deaf ears, our children do hear and are influenced by our opinions. The clearer the message is the better. Start talking with your kids as young as 5 or 6 about tobacco use. If they are older, don't worry, because it's not too late to start. Not sure what to say? There are lots of resources on the web. Here are a few to get you started:

www.cancer.org/docroot/NWS/content/NWS_1_1x_How_to_Get_Kids_to_Say_No_to_Smoking.asp

www.kidshealth.org/parent/positive/talk/smoking.html

www.tobaccofreekids.org/research/factsheets/pdf/0127.pdf

Another great resource is available locally next month. Beginning April 9, CHIPS will be presenting "Guiding Good Choices," a series of five workshops for parents of youth in grades 5 through 9. The fee is only \$25 for all five sessions, and full scholarships are available. This nationally renowned series builds parent confidence and family strengths that give teens a better chance at resisting the temptation to try alcohol, drugs and tobacco. For more information, contact Karin at 878-6989 or email karin@essexchips.org.