

Historically, schools have played an important role in preventing substance abuse among young people. Schools offer opportunities to reach the most children and also serve as important settings for specific at-risk groups, such as children with behavior problems and learning disabilities. Prevention education programs can impart knowledge and develop skills, though research shows that alone they are insufficient to produce far-reaching and long-lasting change.¹⁵ Besides school-based health and prevention education for students, education and training efforts aimed at adults who interact with youth also contribute to prevention.

Education strategies are most likely to be effective if they do one or more of the following:

- Foster young people's social skills and attachment to the school and community
- Include an educational component for parents, with information about drugs for both them and their children
- Focus on training servers and other adults to improve selling and serving practices

Thinking, Social, and Resistance Skills for Students

Certain skills are emerging as critical to preventing substance abuse, including empathy and perspective taking, social problem solving, anger management or impulse control, communication, stress management and coping, media resistance, assertiveness, and character/belief development. Instructional programs tend to be more effective when they:

- Reach children from kindergarten through high school
- Reach young people during nonschool as well as school hours
- Use age and culturally appropriate, interactive teaching materials
- Use a well-tested, science-based curriculum, with detailed lesson plans and student materials
- Combine social and thinking skills instruction with resistance skills training
- Include an adequate "dosage" of at least 10 to 15 sessions per year and another 10 to 15 booster sessions offered no later than three years after the original program
- Include peer education components that are led by students
- Offer professional development or training opportunities for school faculty and staff

Education and Professional Training for Adults

Education for adults can play a significant role as well; public education can raise awareness among broad numbers of people and strengthen environmental approaches to prevention. For instance:

- Server training programs can teach bartenders and wait staff to avoid serving minors and intoxicated customers.
- Merchants can be educated about the laws and penalties for selling alcohol or tobacco to underage customers.

Education Illustration

University Implements Widespread Campaign to Encourage Responsible Beverage Service and Consumption¹⁶

High-risk (or “binge” drinking—the practice of consuming multiple drinks over a short period of time) is a serious problem at colleges and universities nationwide. A 1993 national survey of more than 17,000 students at 140 four-year colleges and universities, conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health, found that 44 percent of the students surveyed were high-risk drinkers.¹⁷ Alcohol-related deaths on campus have figured prominently in the news in recent years, along with exposés on date rape, drunk driving, and other dangerous behaviors associated with high-risk drinking. Campus enforcement of a minimum drinking age is difficult, as students of all ages host parties, and the number of enforcement personnel is limited.

In 1991, Stanford University received a three-year grant from the California State Office of Traffic Safety to reduce problems related to student drinking by encouraging responsible alcoholic beverage service. The Stanford Community Responsible Hospitality Project aimed to encourage members of the Stanford community to party safely and to present a clear and consistent message of responsible drinking (where legal) and hospitality. The project had five important strategies:

- Developing a group of trained student peer educators, called the Party Pro’s. Serving as consultants to students who were planning parties, the Party Pro’s offered help in selecting themes, entertainment, decorations, food, and beverages, as well as in budgeting, fund-raising, and promoting the parties.
- Training peer educators to ensure that their fellow students were familiar with State and campus alcohol policies and laws, and to help student groups such as fraternities and sororities develop policies for their social activities.
- Training student bartenders, as well as sober party monitors to oversee the guests. “Escort coordinators” were also trained to ensure that guests used designated drivers or had other safe transportation at the end of the evening.
- Sponsoring quarterly Event Planning Fairs, with presentations on liability issues and school policies. The Fairs included a trade show where local businesses—such as disc jockeys, party suppliers, caterers, and florists—promoted their services.
- Establishing the Hospitality Alliance with local businesses and public safety officials, who agreed to promote responsible drinking and beverage service—and to occasionally take action against those who did not. For example, student members of the Alliance joined with a local restaurant to voice complaints about another local establishment’s ads in the campus newspaper, offering 25-cent shots; the ads were subsequently dropped.

Findings from the project showed a positive change in the university’s drinking environment; students were holding smaller and more controlled parties, using sober monitors and trained bartenders, checking IDs, and serving food and nonalcoholic beverages. Even after the Office of Traffic Safety funding ended, the Party Pro’s and the Hospitality Alliance continued to function at Stanford.