

DECISIONS



REPRINT

Beyond the Mock Car Crash

SADD was founded 25 years ago by a group of students who wanted to make a difference. They wanted to help their friends and other teens avoid alcohol and other drugs and stop making dangerous choices that put their lives in jeopardy. For many years, the students in SADD chapters have sponsored school activities that are frequently dramatic and emotional, with the goal of impressing on students that alcohol and drug use are not harmless activities and can even result in death. Standard activities for SADD chapters over the years have been Grim Reaper (or Ghost Out) Days, crashed cars on campus, and "scared straight" programs bringing students to jails. The most complex and elaborate example of this approach is the mock car crash. The coordination with school administration, law enforcement, EMTs, funeral parlors, and the media requires planning, commitment, follow-through and sensitivity. When the special effects and acting are good, students can be seriously shaken as they watch their classmates appear dead, dying and under arrest. The presence of police cars, ambulances, hearses, and sometimes even helicopters adds to the real-life impression made by the event.

The mock car crash and other one-time events have been shown to have a short-term effect on students, and witnessing such a reenactment the weekend before prom, for example, may help some students think more carefully over that weekend. But for SADD students who want to use their time and energy to make a lasting difference, and who want to help their peers change their behavior for more than a weekend, is there more that they can do?

The evidence is that, to make lasting change, SADD chapters and others interested in changing youth behavior need to invest in **multiple approaches sustained and reinforced over a long period of time.** What kinds of approaches will work? This is where the science of prevention is very important. SADD chapters, representing a core group of motivated and committed young people, can play an invaluable role in making prevention happen.

The **prevention** movement has evolved over the past few decades. Scientists, researchers, social workers, school counselors, and others have seriously studied how to decrease the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs (ATOD, for those in the know) by adolescents. The same principles that apply to decreasing use of ATOD also work to discourage other problem teen behaviors like violence and teen pregnancy – which is something SADD students recognized ten years ago when they mobilized to change SADD's name to Students Against Destructive Decisions. Prevention programs that have been proven effective through research are called "evidence-based" (or science-based or research-based). Some effective prevention programs help individuals make healthy choices; some work to create an environment that promotes healthy behavior. The important thing for SADD students who want to make a difference is that they can be very powerful in these programs and save their friends' lives in the process.

Beyond the Mock Car Crash, continued ...

What are these programs that work? Evidence-based prevention programs must meet a number of **criteria**. They must:

- Be based on theory,
- Produce positive outcomes,
- Continue to produce positive effects over time, and
- Have the ability to be used in different times and places.

What are the **theories** of prevention? Perhaps the most frequently cited theory involves risk and protective factors, which maintains that there are certain "risk factors" that make it more likely that a teen will drink alcohol or use other drugs or engage in other dangerous behaviors. These risk factors occur in a number of different aspects of a teen's life ("domains"), such as individual, peer, family, school, community, and society. Examples of risk factors are having a family history of alcoholism, friends who use drugs, no clear alcohol policy in school, and no recreational activities for youth in the community. Risk factors can be offset by protective factors such as a supportive family environment (to offset any genetic predisposition to alcoholism), an active guidance department at school (to watch out for students hanging out with the wrong crowd), and constructive afterschool activities (to provide something to do in a community that has no outside recreational opportunities). The idea of prevention programs is to decrease risk factors and increase protective factors. SADD chapters can reinforce protective factors in several domains. You can find more about this theory and how SADD fits in on the SADD Web site: www.sadd.org.

So these theories are fine, but what should a SADD chapter that wants



Several prevention strategies were in action during "Wake Up" rallies held across the country in 2002. SADD students and other teen activists raised awareness about the risks of youth marijuana use.

to make a difference actually do?

There are several **strategies** identified by prevention specialists that can help SADD chapters think about steps they want to take. Examples of these strategies are Policy, Enforcement, Education, Collaboration, and Communication. We have prepared simple explanations of each these strategies on our Web site, along with practical examples of how SADD chapters can use these strategies to take action. We will be adding to this prevention section of our Web site in the future, so you can use this section as a handy resource for the future.

These ideas might be a little different from the activities you have been used to doing. They may require your chapter to stretch a little and reach outside your comfort zone. Many involve working with other groups in your school and community. We think you will find that the more you learn about prevention, the more excited you will be about getting involved in your school and

community in these ways. And, ultimately, we think you will find great satisfaction in knowing that you really made a difference.

Visit www.sadd.org/prevention.htm.