Decreasing High-Risk Behavior in Teens

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Community Health Innovations

Decreasing High-Risk Behavior in Teens

A theater program empowers students to reach out to their peers.

Located on the Connecticut River in rural Windsor, VT, Mt. Ascutney Hospital and Health Center serves 11,000 people—23 percent of whom are under the age of 18. Although it was once a thriving center of industrial tool manufacturing, the Windsor area was hit hard by the industry’s decline in the eighties and nineties, and almost 1,000 jobs were lost. The resulting economic impact was devastating and left few local job opportunities for Windsor’s teens. This circumstance exacerbated the challenges facing our young people, who struggle with such issues as substance abuse, domestic violence, and substandard academic achievement. Concerned about these problems, Mt. Ascutney’s leaders decided that our organization needed to help stem the tide of high-risk behavior, which could rob our community of healthy, productive citizens.

How the Theater Program Works

According to research from the Search Institute, teens respond to an activity-based approach that allows them to reach out to their peers. As a result, we chose to focus our intervention efforts on a theater program, which we started in 1997. As part of In Your Face Gorilla Theater, troupe members research, create, and act out scenarios that encourage other students, parents, and community members to think about where they stand on the tough issues facing young people today. Featuring such topics as substance abuse prevention, nonviolent conflict resolution, teen pregnancy prevention, and effective communication skills, the dramatic presentations are followed by facilitated discussions. Troupe members lead these dialogues—guided by an adult instructor—to reinforce prevention principles, promote healthy behavior, and foster the leadership skills and self-confidence necessary for making wise choices, even in situations that may feel hopeless.

Troupe members convey the important message that every teen has the power to change, the opportunity to positively influence others, and the strength to make healthy decisions.

Known as the Gorillas, troupe members are led by a licensed alcohol and drug abuse counselor, who has a master’s degree in psychology with a concentration in creative arts. The troupe is open to students from age 13 to age 18, and although it is based in Windsor, the program accepts students from across the state. To attract new members, we use both formal and informal recruitment methods, including advertising, invitations, and auditions. When they join the troupe, students are required to sign an agreement to abstain from alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, and they also commit to a regular practice schedule. The Gorillas perform in schools, at community events, and at conferences throughout Vermont, and their productions range in length from one hour to an intensive weekend session to a two-week drama camp. In the future, we plan to use videos to expand the reach of the Gorillas.

What the Theater Program Has Accomplished

To get a feel for this program’s scope, consider that from January to May 2003, the 22 members of In Your Face Gorilla Theater staged 23 productions in 16 different communities, reaching 2,376 young people and 577 adults. According to formal behavior evaluations and post-performance surveys that judge the Gorillas’ impact on audience members, teens have been empowered to choose healthy behaviors and change the harmful subculture within their schools. For example, our community has experienced a significant decrease in substance abuse among youth:

- Only 6 percent of eighth graders smoke, compared with 17 percent in 1999.
- The percentage of eighth graders who drink has decreased from 35 percent in 1999 to 18 percent in 2003.
- At 7 percent, marijuana use among eighth graders is the lowest it has ever been, down from a high of 19 percent in 2001.
These successes make the challenges inherent in sponsoring In Your Face Gorilla Theater worthwhile. For instance, we are constantly looking for sources to donate funds for the troupe’s travel expenses, staff salaries, and performance materials. And since we are committed to supporting the Gorillas’ scholastic achievements, we must work with teachers and parents to determine how much time troupe members can take from their school obligations to meet the growing demand for their performances.

Through the theater program, we have found a way to break the cycle of high-risk behavior in our community’s youth. Troupe members convey the important message that every teen has the power to change, the opportunity to positively influence others, and the strength to make healthy decisions. Each performance ends with the troupe saying in unison, “We are In Your Face Gorilla Theater! We are here to bust your stereotypes! We are the youth of Vermont!” And, I would add, they are the future of Vermont.

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