# Prevention Services | *Best PRACTICES*

SURRY COUNTY OFFICE
OF
SUBSTANCE ABUSE RECOVERY

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# Executive Summary

This document synthesizes key insights from the provided sources regarding effective youth substance abuse prevention. It advocates for evidence-based approaches that emphasize skill development, environmental strategies, norms correction, and comprehensive family and community engagement.

Special attention is given to best practices for fentanyl and opioid prevention, including realistic education, overdose response training, and early intervention. The overarching message is that successful prevention relies on scientifically supported methods rather than outdated tactics.

In contrast, the document highlights that many commonly used prevention strategies are ineffective or even counterproductive, often lacking scientific support and relying on fear-based, moralistic messaging or the inappropriate use of recovery story telling with youth.

# What is Substance Use Prevention?

Substance use prevention involves various strategies to stop or delay substance use, reduce its progression to abuse or dependence, and mitigate its negative consequences. It addresses underlying factors rather than reacting to problems. This comprehensive field draws from public health, psychology, sociology, education, and economics to develop evidence-based interventions for diverse populations.

Substance use prevention operates at multiple levels: universal interventions targeting entire populations, selective interventions for at-risk groups, and indicated interventions for individuals with early signs of problems. Universal prevention involves public awareness campaigns, school-based education, and community policies promoting healthy behaviors. Selective prevention targets adolescents with a family history of addiction or individuals in high-risk environments, offering more intensive support. Indicated prevention aims to prevent substance use escalation into a disorder through early identification and intervention.

Effective substance use prevention requires a multi-faceted approach that considers individual vulnerabilities, environmental influences, and developmental stages. Key components include strengthening protective factors like strong family bonds, positive peer relationships, academic success, and coping skills. Prevention efforts also aim to reduce risk factors like peer pressure, easy access to substances, lack of parental supervision, and exposure to trauma. This involves educational strategies, policy changes, community mobilization, and promoting alternative healthy activities.

The goal is to foster resilient individuals and communities with the knowledge, skills, and support systems to make healthy choices and resist substance use pressures. It's an ongoing process that requires sustained commitment, collaboration among stakeholders, and continuous evaluation to ensure the effectiveness and adaptability of prevention strategies in a constantly evolving society.

# Is Substance Use Prevention an Actual Professional Field?

Substance use prevention, a distinct and evolving professional field, requires specialized training and continuous education. Practitioners, not simply volunteers or concerned citizens, pursue formal academic pathways and professional development to design, implement, and evaluate effective prevention strategies. This involves understanding the neuroscience of addiction, human behavior, sociological factors, public health principles, and evidence-based intervention methodologies.

The professionalization of substance use prevention is evident in specific certifications, licensures, and academic programs. Many states and professional bodies offer credentials like Certified Prevention Specialist (CPS) within North Carolina, requiring extensive training, supervised experience, and successful examinations. Universities and colleges increasingly offer degrees, minors, and concentrations in public health, community health education, and prevention science, equipping future professionals with a robust theoretical foundation and practical application skills. These educational avenues cover program planning, evaluation, grant writing, policy development, and cultural competency, all crucial for effective prevention work.

The field of substance use prevention operates on core competencies that guide professional practice. These competencies include prevention education and health promotion, community organization, policy and environmental change, ethical considerations, cultural responsiveness, and data collection and analysis. Professionals assess community needs, identify risk and protective factors, select and adapt evidence-based programs, deliver interventions with fidelity, and continuously monitor outcomes. This systematic approach ensures that prevention efforts are evidence-based and tailored to specific community contexts.

Substance use prevention is a vibrant profession dedicated to fostering healthier communities by proactively addressing the root causes and contributing factors of substance use. It requires a dedicated workforce committed to ongoing learning, ethical standards, and specialized knowledge and skills. Training and education ensure that prevention initiatives are sophisticated, data-driven, and capable of making a tangible and sustainable impact on public health.

# Is Substance Use Prevention and Counseling or the Recovery Movement the Same Thing?

While lived experience in recovery or related fields, such as treatment or counseling, is valuable, it doesn't automatically equip individuals to effectively practice substance use prevention. Prevention is a distinct public health discipline with its own evidence base, frameworks, and methodologies. Personal understanding of addiction or treatment skills don't enable individuals to identify community-level risk and protective factors, design interventions, or implement environmental strategies. These require a different skill set focused on epidemiology, program planning, policy analysis, and community mobilization.

Allowing individuals without specific prevention training to lead prevention efforts risks implementing ineffective or harmful strategies. Intuitive approaches based on personal experience or anecdotal evidence often lack scientific validation. Focusing solely on individual-level interventions without addressing broader community or systemic factors can lead to limited impact. Without a foundational understanding of prevention science, practitioners may unintentionally reinforce stigma, alienate key populations, or misallocate resources to ineffective programs.

A common pitfall is relying on scare tactics or well-intentioned but counterproductive recovery storytelling as primary prevention strategies. Scare tactics, which aim to deter substance use by instilling fear of extreme negative consequences, are ineffective and can even backfire, increasing curiosity or rebellion, especially among youth. Personal recovery narratives can reduce stigma, inspire hope, and connect individuals in recovery, but they're not effective for primary prevention. Hearing vivid accounts of addiction's depths can paradoxically normalize or even glamorize substance use, making it seem like a rite of passage or an experience from which one can always recover. Focusing on the individual's journey often shifts responsibility away from societal factors, failing to equip young people with skills to navigate environmental pressures and structural inequalities that contribute to substance use.

Effective substance use prevention requires a specific body of knowledge and professional competencies. While recovery experience and expertise from related fields contribute to care, they're distinct from the specialized training needed to understand and apply prevention science. Entrusting prevention work to those without this expertise risks wasting resources, failing to achieve outcomes, and causing unintended negative consequences.

## Evidence-Based Science-Based Prevention Strategies

There are four key categories of scientifically supported prevention strategies.

Skill-Building Programs:
- Programs that cultivate social-emotional skills, such as decision-making, communication, and coping, are strongly supported by research.
- These programs are characterized as interactive, developmentally appropriate, and focused on risk and protective factors.

Environmental and Policy Strategies:
- Addressing factors such as outlet density, marketing, and enforcement has a measurable impact on youth substance use.

Norms Correction:
- This is a low-cost, high-impact method to reduce pressure and normalize healthy choices by correcting misconceptions about peer use (e.g., "everyone's doing it").

Family and Community Engagement:
- Programs that involve caregivers and community systems demonstrate the most significant and enduring effects.

## Best Practices for Fentanyl and Opioid Prevention Among Youth

Given the escalating threat of fentanyl and opioid misuse, specific evidence-based practices are paramount.

Realistic, Non-Stigmatizing Education:
- Educate students on the prevalence of fentanyl in counterfeit pills and other illicit substances.
- Employ clear and medically accurate language to elucidate potency and overdose risks, refraining from exaggeration that could compromise credibility.

Overdose Response Training and Naloxone Access:
- Provide training to school staff and age-appropriate education to students on recognizing and responding to opioid overdoses.
- Ensure the accessibility of Naloxone (Narcan) in the community and youth-serving organizations.
- Promote overdose response as a "community safety skill, not a moral imperative.

Screening and Early Intervention:
- Utilize evidence-based screening tools such as SBIRT in school and healthcare settings.
- Provide non-punitive referrals to mental health and substance use services.
- Identify and address concurrent mental health challenges promptly.

## The Ineffectiveness of Common Prevention Strategies

This practice fact sheet critically analyzes prevalent youth substance abuse prevention methods, deeming them "outdated and ineffective strategies—approaches that may seem intuitive or emotionally compelling but lack scientific evidence. These common approaches frequently fail or cause harm.

Scare Tactics are Ineffective and Counterproductive:

- Fear-based strategies, such as graphic overdose images or tragic testimonials, have little to no long-term impact on youth behavior.
- Sacre Tactics can actually harm the youth by increasing curiosity, desensitizing youth, or undermining trust in the messenger.

Moralistic Appeals and Messages Miss the Mark:

- These messages often stigmatize youth who have already used substances and ignore the social and environmental factors influencing behavior.
- Moralistic Appeals actually lack skill-building and fail to prepare youth for real-life decision-making.

## Serious Dangers of Recovery Stories and "War Stories"

Recovery stories and "war stories" pose significant risks, including the normalization and glorification of drug use. These narratives, particularly those featuring vivid drug experiences, can inadvertently glamorize high-risk behavior, particularly for impressionable youth who seek risk, identity, or belonging.

Furthermore, these stories can lead to harmful interpretations and risk models. Youth may internalize the dangerous message that drug use is survivable, even inevitable, or that suffering leads to redemption. This narrative is particularly concerning given the increasing prevalence of fentanyl in counterfeit pills.

Additionally, such stories can cause emotional harm to vulnerable youth. They may be triggering or overwhelming for individuals with trauma histories or family struggles, potentially leading to disengagement rather than resilience.

# The Impact of Meta Analysis

Meta-analysis demonstrates that substance use prevention is a science-based field with an evidence base, moving communities beyond ineffective approaches. It combines results from multiple independent studies on the same research question, increasing statistical power and precision. For substance use prevention, researchers can synthesize findings from dozens or even hundreds of prevention programs implemented in diverse settings, across different populations, and over various timeframes to identify consistent patterns of effectiveness.

Meta-analyses definitively show which prevention strategies consistently produce positive outcomes, such as reduced rates of initiation, decreased frequency of use, or lower incidence of related harms. For example, a meta-analysis can quantify the overall effect size of school-based life skills programs consistently delaying alcohol initiation, demonstrating their statistical reliability. This contrasts with anecdotal evidence or programs based solely on personal experience, which lack rigorous empirical scrutiny. Meta-analysis allows the prevention field to confidently assert that certain approaches are evidence-based due to demonstrated efficacy across research.

Furthermore, meta-analysis helps communities move beyond good intent by highlighting ineffective or counterproductive programs. Many programs relying on scare tactics or simple information dissemination without skill-building components have been found to be ineffective or produce negligible effects. This scientific scrutiny steers communities away from wasting resources on programs with little return on investment in public health outcomes. It underscores the difference between a program that feels right or has a compelling narrative and one that has been empirically proven to work.

To make the biggest difference for our communities, we must actively integrate meta-analysis lessons with subject matter expertise. Meta-analyses provide robust evidence of general effectiveness, but subject matter experts—with deep understanding of local contexts, cultural factors, and specific population needs—can adapt these strategies to be most effective for a particular community. This synthesis ensures prevention efforts are scientifically sound, practical, culturally relevant, and tailored to local realities. It reinforces the message that while good intentions are necessary, prevention strategies must be designed, implemented, and evaluated with scientific rigor, utilizing both broad empirical evidence and localized expert knowledge, to achieve meaningful and sustainable positive change.

# Conclusion

This brief underscores that effective youth substance use prevention necessitates the abandonment of outdated, fear-based, and moralistic approaches that fail to align with the actual mechanisms of behavior change.

Instead, success hinges on engaging youth through skill-building, accurate education, environmental supports, family involvement, and early intervention—particularly in the context of the fentanyl crisis—to effectively reduce risk and save lives. While past prevention efforts may feel good in the moment, they may actually create long term harm to the youth we serve and the community at large.

# About the Editor

C. Jamie Edwards is a professional in the fields of education, community research, substance use prevention and treatment. He serves as the Director of the Surry County Office of Substance Abuse Recovery and the Clinical Director of the Surry Transition Project.

Jamie holds multiple graduate degrees and certificates in the Liberal Arts, Education, Addictions Counseling, and Social Gerontology. He is a North Carolina Licensed Clinical Addictions Specialist (LCAS) and a North Carolina Certified Prevention Specialist (CPS). Additionally, he serves as a Certified Clinical Supervisor (CCS) in both North Carolina and Virginia and a Licensed Substance Abuse Treatment Practitioner in Virginia (LSATP).

He has worked in the field of criminal justice, addictions, substance use prevention and higher education since 1995.

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