

Decision Making Skills for Children and Adolescents: A Public Health Issue

The following report is taken from the issue brief, Improving Decision Making Skills for Children and Adolescents: State Health Departments' Role, written by the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials' (ASTHO) Adolescent and School Health Project. The ASTHO brief emphasizes the importance of the development of health decision making skills in childhood and adolescence. It also recognizes the important role public health institutions play in helping fund and develop programs that allow for these skills to be learned. This excerpt contains a partial list of the programs and initiatives ASTHO recommends as effective in promoting decision making skills.

Many of the health challenges young people face today are related to the behaviors they adopt. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), some behaviors established during youth contribute markedly to today's major killers: heart disease, cancer, and injuries. These behaviors include eating an unhealthy diet, inadequate physical activity, and drug use (including tobacco and alcohol). Sexual behaviors can result in HIV infection, other sexually transmitted diseases, and unintended pregnancies. Other behaviors put youth at risk for intentional (violence and suicide) and unintentional injuries. All these behaviors involve making decisions that put an individual at risk for disease and death.

Optimal decision making involves identifying alternatives, weighing possible consequences resulting from each option, and determining which choices will most likely result in the desired goals. In reality, however, behavioral decision making also is affected by such factors as stress, time, and peer pressure.

Professionals in public health and education recognize the importance of strong decision making skills to the physical and mental health of children and adolescents. To develop these skills children and youth need to be able to use them through everyday decision making. This day-to-day process of learning to make healthy, positive decisions, including those made under stress, promotes the well-being of both the individual and the many others who are also affected by his or her decisions.

As the leaders and experts in health issues, public health agencies can work with state

departments of education to promote decision making skills as an important component of education. Because health-related behaviors are usually established in childhood, positive choices need to be encouraged before damaging behaviors are initiated or become habits.

The Search Institute, an independent, nonprofit organization that does research on issues concerning children and youth, has identified 40 developmental assets that are the essential building blocks of child and adolescent development for them to grow up healthy, responsible, and caring. Research has shown that teaching children and adolescents these skills has been effective in lowering their risk taking behaviors. Many states are including decision making components in recently implemented or already existing coordinated school health programs. Although these programs are based in the schools, they include family and community involvement.

Traditional health education curricula are organized around comprehension of health facts delivered by topic. In contrast, life skills education calls for an emphasis on using essential health knowledge to adopt, practice, and maintain healthy behaviors. With this focus, health education instructional units are part of a planned, comprehensive, sequential program implemented in kindergarten through 12th grade. The learning objectives

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for the students are that they acquire skills in communication, nonviolent conflict resolution, decision making, goal setting, stress management, and resistance to negative social pressure.

Research has shown that these types of health education programs are the most effective way to encourage young people to learn and practice healthful behaviors they will maintain throughout their lives. It is important for health departments, in their role as proponents of healthy lifestyles, to be involved with education agencies in developing and funding curricula and programs that focus on health decision making skills as part of coordinated health programs.

The following programs have proven to be effective in teaching youth decision making skills. (Contact information is included.)

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) is a comprehensive program developed by the Prevention Research Center of Pennsylvania State University. (Dr. Mark Greenberg, Director; 814/865-2618, mxg47@psu.edu.)

The Choice Is Yours: Avoiding HIV/STDs is a series of interactive videodisc programs designed by the Oregon Center for Applied Studies to reduce HIV/STD risk. (800/421-2304, <http://www.pyramidmedia.com/cart/teenchoicesHIVSTD.html>)

Be Proud! Be Responsible! is a CDC-recommended curriculum that targets African American, Hispanic, and White youth, 14 to 18 years of age, who attend schools or community-based programs. (Select Media, 800/343-5540)



To obtain the full ASTHO document, contact Andrea Smith at (202)371-9090.

Assessing and Addressing Youth Risk Behaviors in Texas

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention developed the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) in collaboration with representatives from 71 state and local departments of education and 19 other federal agencies. Designed to monitor priority health-risk behaviors that contribute to the leading cause of mortality, morbidity, and social problems among youth and adults, the YRBS has three complementary components: national school-based surveys, state and local school-based surveys, and a national household-based survey.

The YRBS was first used by 24 states and 8 local education agencies during the spring of 1990. In 1997, 39 states, 4 territories, and 16 local education agencies conducted surveys. The YRBS was done statewide by the Texas Education Agency, with the UT School of Public Health in Houston, in the school year 1992-93 (See DPN Vol 54, Nos. 20

and 22) and by the Texas A&M University School of Rural Public Health in March 1998. CDC could not include any of the Texas results in the national data because the survey responses were inadequate. The Texas Department of Health (TDH) is conducting a modified school-based YRBS from March through May 1999. A sample of 34 public high schools (grades 9-12) have been asked to participate. With an adequate response rate, these results should be generalizable.

Many TDH programs include educational components regarding lifestyle choices. The key TDH programs that emphasize youth decision making skills, however, are found in the Child Health and Safety Division. The School Health Program, in particular, is actively promoting inclusion of decision making skills into TDH health education efforts and those of statewide education centers, including public schools.

For further information on the YRBS, contact Celan Alo at (512) 458-7111 x2053. For information about life skills education for school-age youth contact Marion Stoutner at (512) 458-7111 x3053 and visit the TDH School Health website, <http://www.tdh.state.tx.us/school/schhea~1.htm>.

Perspectives in Public Health: Texas Department of Health (TDH) Quarterly CME Conference

On Friday, June 18, 1999, from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM, the Texas Department of Health (TDH) will present its Perspectives in Public Health: TDH Quarterly CME Conference. Designed for public health and primary care physicians, the conference will be held at the North Austin Medical Center, in the Decherd Auditorium, 12221 Mopac Expressway N. in Austin, Texas. The program will consist of lectures supplemented by audiovisual slide presentations.

After attending this conference, the participants will be able to

- ♦ prevent, detect at an early stage, treat, control, or take remedial action against specific medical conditions that may adversely affect the health of individuals and populations in Texas;
- ♦ identify policies, processes, and products that promote and protect the health of people and preserve environmental quality; and
- ♦ establish relationships with other physicians concerned with public health and preventive medicine issues through dialogue with presenters and other participants.

Topics covered at the upcoming conference include

- ♦ Putting Prevention Into Practice: Overview of Complimentary and Alternative Medicine (CAM)
Donald R. Counts, MD, FAAFP, Solo Family Practice, Consultant, Alternative Medicine Clinic, Seton Hospital, Austin, Texas
- ♦ Overview of Occupational and Environmental Medicine
Jon T. O'Neal, MD, MPH, Director, Seton Occupational Medicine, Seton Healthcare Network, Austin, Texas
- ♦ OSHA Bloodborne Pathogens Standards
Jon T. O'Neal, MD, MPH, Director, Seton Occupational Medicine, Seton Healthcare Network, Austin, Texas
- ♦ Medical Newsdesk
Cynthia Perry, DO, MPH, Resident Physician, Public Health Region 7, Texas Department of Health, Temple, Texas
- ♦ Cutting Through the Fog of Public Health Nutrition
RoseAnn Loop, PhD, Professor, Division of Nutrition, Department of Human Ecology, University of Texas, Austin, Texas
- ♦ Commissioner's Hour: The Lost Consciousness of Public Health
William R. Archer, III, MD, Commissioner of Health, Texas Department of Health, Austin, Texas

The Texas Department of Health designates this educational activity for a maximum of 6 hours in Category 1 credit towards the AMA Physician's Recognition Award. Each physician should claim only those hours of credit that he/she actually spent in the educational activity.

This program has been reviewed and is acceptable for 5.75 prescribed hours by the American Academy of Family Physicians.

The Texas Department of Health is accredited by the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education to sponsor continuing medical education for physicians.

For further information and to register, call the TDH Public Health Professional Education Program at (800) 252-8239, Press 4, or (512) 458-7677. You may pay the registration fee at that time by credit card or you may send a check with the completed form located on the back page of this issue.



Disease Prevention News (DPN)
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The electronic versions of *Disease Prevention News* are available at the following locations:
<http://www.tdh.state.tx.us/phpep/dpnhome.htm>
 TDH Healthy Texans BBS: (800) 858-5833

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To register for the Texas Department of Health Quarterly CME Conference, call the TDH Public Health Professional Education Program at **(800) 252-8239, press 4, or (512) 458-7677**. You may pay the registration fee at that time by credit card or you may send a check with this completed form to the **Texas Department of Health 4C423-001, P.O. Box 149200, Austin, Texas 78714-9200**.

4C423-001 **Registration Form** **DPN**

Perspectives in Public Health: Texas Department of Health Quarterly CME Conference
 Friday, June 18, 1999 8:00 AM - 4:00 PM

Registration Fee: \$50 Regular \$25 Residents/Fellows (with verification letter) Please call me regarding special needs

Name _____ SS # _____ Change of Address Y N

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Fax # _____ Internet Address _____

Employment Setting: TDH Local Health Dept. Private Practice Managed Care Other - Specify _____

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For information and to register, call (800) 252-8239 press 4 or (512) 458-7677.
To pay by check, include payment with this registration form and mail to
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Space Is Limited - Reservations Must Be Received By June 11, 1999

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