

Looking SHARP

Something good is happening with Shaker teens. We asked Shaker Middle School students how much they think young people risk harming themselves if they smoke a pack of cigarettes a day, or if they take one or two drinks of an alcoholic beverage nearly every day, or if they smoke marijuana regularly.

During the past two years, perceptions have changed significantly. Two years ago, only 55 percent of Middle School students recognized that “great harm” could come from teens smoking cigarettes, a number that is now up to 74 percent. Perception of harm from marijuana has gone up from 70 percent to 78 percent, and, for alcohol, from 38 percent to 51 percent.

These topics are the emphasis of a unique student peer health promotion program called SHARP (Student Health Advocates Reaching Peers).

Since 2002, the Shaker Prevention Coalition has trained high school students to act as health educators and advocates among their peers. The Shaker Prevention Coalition is an inclusive community partnership based at the Shaker Heights Health Department. Support is provided by a grant from the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration’s Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. For more information, visit www.shakerprevention.org.

SHARP members participate in an intensive summer program that challenges students to become leaders through health advocacy. In school and community-based settings, SHARP members organize and facilitate peer education sessions that assist young people in developing the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate through tough decisions.

The ability to make sound decisions is an important skill adolescents must acquire and apply to achieve and maintain a healthy, substance-free lifestyle. SHARP members present an evidence-based youth development and substance abuse prevention curriculum to sixth graders at Woodbury School. SHARP students also help educate Shaker parents about adolescent issues and create health promotion materials that are used throughout the school year.

These changes in attitude have also resulted in changes in health choices. Since the onset of the program, Shaker Middle School students have demonstrated significant drops in lifetime and current cigarette smoking (27 percent to 16 percent and 6.6 percent to 2.6 percent respectively), current cigar use (10 percent to 5 percent), and lifetime and current alcohol use (39 percent to 32 percent and 17 percent to 11 percent respectively). Current marijuana use remains low but unchanged (3.7 percent). Rates of substance use in Shaker are in fact consistently lower than state and national levels.

There is no question that kids listen to other kids in a way they don’t listen to adults. Teens often trust information offered by near peers more than they trust the same information from adults. When young adolescents hear from older teens that not using is not just okay but in fact the norm, it gives kids permission to resist pressure to make unhealthy choices. When an older teen advocates making healthy choices, it suddenly becomes cool to do so.

This summer the SHARP program expanded to include a Junior SHARP program for Middle School students who have benefited from SHARP teaching. As adults and parents, we owe a debt of gratitude to these students, who have the courage to make healthy decisions and to encourage others to do the same.

