

Wyoming Drug Free Youth Groups

The Wyoming Survey & Analysis Center researched five successful drug free youth groups selected by the Wyoming Department of Health, Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services Division. The primary goal of the study was to identify common elements and/or critical factors to group success. Therefore background literature was reviewed related to peer support theories, evidence based intervention, and prevention theories and philosophies in advance of protocol development.

A team of two researchers gathered five types of data at each site, 1) interviews with one or two adult stakeholders, 2) interviews with one or two youth leaders, 3) a focus group with participating youth, 4) a tour of related facilities, and 5) program documents for content analysis. A qualitative analysis of these data revealed that stakeholders and participants overall report nine factors as critical to group success and sustainability. While each factor may be implemented in a slightly different manner, to work with and within each unique community, some version of these factors is critical to group success in each case reviewed.

NINE SUCCESS FACTORS

Youth run meetings, functions, and activities were identified consistently by both adults and peer participants as the most critical factor in this type of group's success. All five groups had a strong youth leadership component, and primarily youth made decisions. Youth even participated in reprimanding or sanctioning fellow members who did not adhere to the pledge or code of conduct. Adults served to reign in ideas that went beyond resource potential.

Consistent high-energy adult support was uniformly reported as essential. An adult with a minimum of a 20 hour per week commitment during the school year, with some summer access depending on program design and facility accessibility is essential. Adult leaders observed had a high level of energy and enthusiasm for the work, and utilized creative communication techniques such as group texting to stay connected. Each coordinator shared being strongly motivated by the success of the youth and a belief in what he/she was doing.

Positive focus was fundamental for all groups. Each emphasized the benefits of remaining drug free as paramount to success, while creating an environment where youth could have fun and spend time with peers engaging in enjoyable drug and alcohol free activities. Two of the five groups used formal educational programming about substance abuse and related issues as secondary motivators. Drug free events hosted included dances, community wide water fights and dodgeball tournaments involving law enforcement as participants, and one group's youth leaders served as sponsors at jr. high dances.

Leadership development including personal competence or self management was often reported as a critical component. All five groups focused on developing youth leaders with adult guidance. These youth leaders were held to a higher standard of non-use, and were seen as role models by other youth and the community. In all cases youth leaders made presentations to junior high and/or elementary youth. Presentations were recruitment tools that also served to encourage positive choices and social norms.

5 Motivation to make substance use unappealing (consequences) and/or non-use appealing (rewards) was another prominent theme. All groups identified making non-use appealing as a critical factor. Additionally, motivation to remain a member included consequences for leaving in all five scenarios. Four of the five required parental permission to drug test upon suspicion. Positive motivators included rooms, games, computer access, personal trading cards, trips, and trainings. Serving food at meetings was mentioned by all.

6 Interpersonal and social skills development to strengthen the ability to cope with social influences was incorporated into each program. Each group used youth leaders to reach out to younger individuals in a manner that demonstrated strong social skills. One group developed formal curriculum that incorporated social skill development and taught it in lower grades. Many youth reported the opportunity to influence younger peers as one of the most positive experiences with the group. Several stated they took great pride in shaping the community.

7 A conducive social and community environment was also necessary. Part of this was an emphasis on building capacity through connections to community stakeholders. Having a youth member attend city council meetings and others serve on community boards or reaching out to community business partners was important, as was a relationship with the school(s). This concept of a conducive social environment goes beyond initial connections with stakeholders to a level of social norming throughout the group and community. When the perceived norm reaches a level of non-use, recruiting members and stakeholders becomes much easier.

8 Financial support to ensure program continuity is an important factor for participants and stakeholders. The amount of funding available varied between groups, directly effecting programmatic reach. Reduced financial worry is a critical factor in group success due to the critical nature of consistent adult involvement and the increased potential for adult turnover if funding is variable. Resource needs motivated youth to assist with a variety of fundraisers. In some cases these were traditional youth fundraisers but most included some community outreach to get funds, matching funds, or member incentive discounts. Some youth worked directly with grant writing on both local and regional grants, while others spoke to local civic organizations. One received consistent funding from a private donor. Fund raising activities were also conducive to goals related to developing leadership, interpersonal, and social skills.

9 A formal commitment to remain drug free was universal. All programs required a formal commitment of participants to remain drug free and most required parental permission or support to participate at the full level of leadership. Some groups required a parent's notarized signature on the permission form, indicating awareness of drug testing if reasonable suspicion exists. Those signed by parents of junior high, middle school and elementary students as early as fourth grade were less comprehensive than those for youth leaders and in programs that only allowed membership to begin at the high school level. Even in the group that only focused on drug abuse the leadership commitment went beyond drugs to include alcohol and tobacco, explaining that these youth are held up as role models to the community.



Dr. Trena T. Anastasia
University of Wyoming
tanastas@uwyo.edu

When empowered, teens are in a unique position to influence youth, peers, and adults, providing a catalyst for additional support and increased community involvement.