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Parents, kids learn about each other in DHS Strengthening Families classes

When parents and their kids are talking and listening to each other, it leads to better communication, mutual respect and stronger family bonds. And when parents set clear guidelines it helps their kids stay out of trouble and away from drugs and alcohol.

That's what many parents said they learned after taking Strengthening Families Program classes in 30 locations across the state this summer. The program is geared to parents and their 10- to 14-year-old children and is funded by the Oregon Department of Human Services Addictions and Mental Health Division (AMH). There are 146 more classes scheduled over the next 18 months; several are starting this fall.

The 2007 Oregon Legislature authorized \$1.56 million for the Strengthening Families Program to help families improve parenting and communication skills and other family dynamics that are scientifically proven to prevent teen alcohol and drug abuse and behavior problems.

For parents or guardians, the seven weekly class sessions stress positive involvement, setting clear rules for kids, and creating family harmony. Kids sharpen their peer resistance skills, learn about consequences when breaking a rule, and learn to talk through tough issues. This is done through role playing, discussions, videos, games and family projects.

The program has a strong track record in Washington. Researchers found that young people in participating families were more likely to associate with appropriate peers and resist drugs and other problem activities such as aggressive behavior.

Parents became better at listening to and managing their kids, which had an overall positive effect on the family.

“Researchers have seen a 49 percent reduction of alcohol use among eighth graders who participated in the program when they were in sixth grade,” said Rick Cady, AMH prevention manager. “And 53 percent of these eighth graders were less likely to use marijuana. These are significant findings when you consider the problem of underage drinking and other drug use in Oregon.”

Praise for program

Recent Oregon graduates of a Strengthening Families class in Marion County gave testimonials to the program.

One mother said that “understanding my son’s age and how to help him deal with peer pressure and life in general” was her most important lesson. Another learned that parents and kids “have to work together for the family to be loving and respectful.” A mother said the classes “helped our family to become closer, and we gained more understanding of our youth, how he feels, the issues he faces, and how we can help him become a responsible adult.”

One youngster said he learned “how to respect my parents and how I can control my attitude” and another discovered the importance of family members “talking to each other.”

Approximately 300 Oregon parents and young people have attended the classes, which are given in English and Spanish. Washington State University is evaluating program data and reported that 78 percent of the participants completed at least five of seven sessions and graduated.

Parents and teens surveyed after the class said they were communicating better about substance use and family rules. They reported increases in family involvement and harmony and that family tension eased, with fewer arguments about chores and homework.

In a 2003 Strengthening Families research trial, changes in these short-term program outcomes were linked to long-term reduction of alcohol, tobacco and methamphetamine use by young people who attended the program.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy found that the program can bring significant savings to communities in criminal justice costs related to substance abuse – an estimated \$5,800 per each youth participant in the Strengthening Families Program.