Prevention Is More Than a Warning

Why life skills, supportive relationships and community partnerships matter in preventing youth substance use

For decades, drug prevention often started with a fairly simple assumption: Give young people enough information about the risks of drugs, and they will make better choices.

Studies of early school-based prevention programs challenged that assumption. While some increased knowledge or changed attitudes in the short term, they often did little to produce lasting reductions in substance use. [1]

Those findings helped reshape prevention.

Young people need accurate information about substances and their risks. But information alone does not necessarily change behavior. Prevention must also account for the many complex factors surrounding a young person: mental health and the ability to cope with stress; relationships with family, peers and trusted adults; experiences at school; trauma and instability; social and community norms; the availability and visibility of substances; and the broader conditions in the communities where they live.

Just as important are the factors that can protect young people: connection and belonging, supportive relationships, practical coping and decision-making skills, positive school and community experiences, and access to help when they begin to struggle.

That broader understanding is changing the way schools, public health agencies and community organizations approach substance use prevention.

And the stakes are especially high.

A harder landscape for young people

The country remains in the midst of what the U.S. Surgeon General has described as a "national youth mental health crisis." [2]

In 2025, more than 1 in 7 adolescents ages 12 to 17 experienced a major depressive episode, and 11% experienced depression severe enough to significantly interfere with their lives. Among adolescents with a substance use disorder, nearly one-third also experienced a major depressive episode. [3]

Those numbers tell only part of the story.

Young people are growing up in an environment their parents never experienced at the same age. They are navigating a constant digital presence, shifting social pressures, bullying that can follow them home, and a changing drug landscape of "gas station drugs," gummies and counterfeit pills. [4]

Curated versions of other people's lives are available around the clock, along with constant opportunities for social comparison and visible measures of approval and rejection. Young people may also encounter cyberbullying, harmful content and disruptions to sleep. [5]

A 2025 study that followed nearly 12,000 children and adolescents found that as young people's social media use increased, so did depressive symptoms a year later, although researchers continue to examine how these effects differ from one young person to another. [6]

Substance use rarely happens in isolation

For some young people, those pressures are layered on top of trauma, family instability, parental substance use, abuse, abandonment, family separation, depression, anxiety and other mental health challenges.

In that context, substance use can become a way to cope — to numb difficult emotions, quiet anxiety, escape what is happening around them or simply get through the day.

A teenager may understand that a substance is risky and still reach for it if it seems to offer relief from something that feels even harder to manage.

Los Angeles County's Substance Abuse Prevention and Control program takes a broad view of prevention, addressing not only individual behavior but also the risk and protective factors, social conditions and community environments that influence substance use. [7]

"Prevention isn't simply about convincing young people that drugs are dangerous. It's about helping them develop the skills, relationships and support they can draw on when they're dealing with stress, pressure or difficult circumstances," says Sarah Redfield, prevention manager for PHCA.

In practice, that can mean learning how to manage pressure, communicate, solve problems, navigate relationships and know when to ask for help.

PHCA's LifeSkills program is one example. Implemented in schools in Los Angeles County's Service Planning Area 2, the evidence-based program helps young people strengthen decision-making and develop practical tools for making healthier choices.

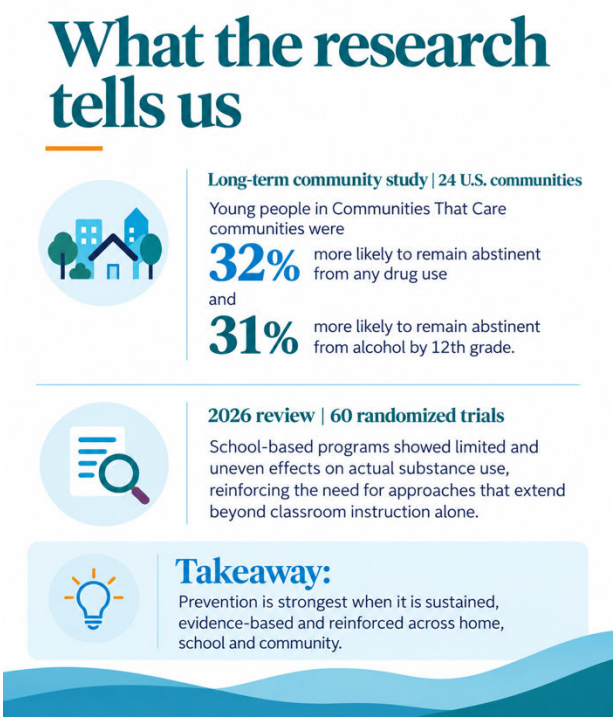
What the research points to

Some of the strongest prevention efforts reach far beyond a single campaign or classroom presentation.

One of the best-studied examples, Communities That Care, brought schools, families and community partners together to identify the particular risk and protective factors affecting young people in their communities and put evidence-based programs in place in response.

In a long-term randomized study involving 24 U.S. communities, young people in participating communities were 32% more likely to have remained abstinent from any drug use and 31% more likely to have remained abstinent from alcohol by 12th grade. Some benefits continued even after the study-funded programming ended. [8]

Not every prevention effort has produced those kinds of results. A 2026 review of 60 randomized trials found that school-based programs had limited and uneven effects on actual substance use, even when some showed benefits in areas such as knowledge or short-term tobacco use. The researchers pointed to the need for more comprehensive approaches that extend beyond classroom instruction alone. [9]



The lesson is not that one model has solved youth substance use.

It is that prevention appears to be strongest when it is sustained, grounded in evidence and reinforced across the places young people actually live their lives.

“A young person’s well-being is shaped by what happens at home, at school and in the community. Prevention is stronger when those environments reinforce one another and young people have consistent support across the different parts of their lives,” says Mary Hale, M.S., a PHCA board member and former Orange County behavioral health director who now serves with Children and Family Futures’ National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare.

That shift is visible in prevention programs operating across Southern California.

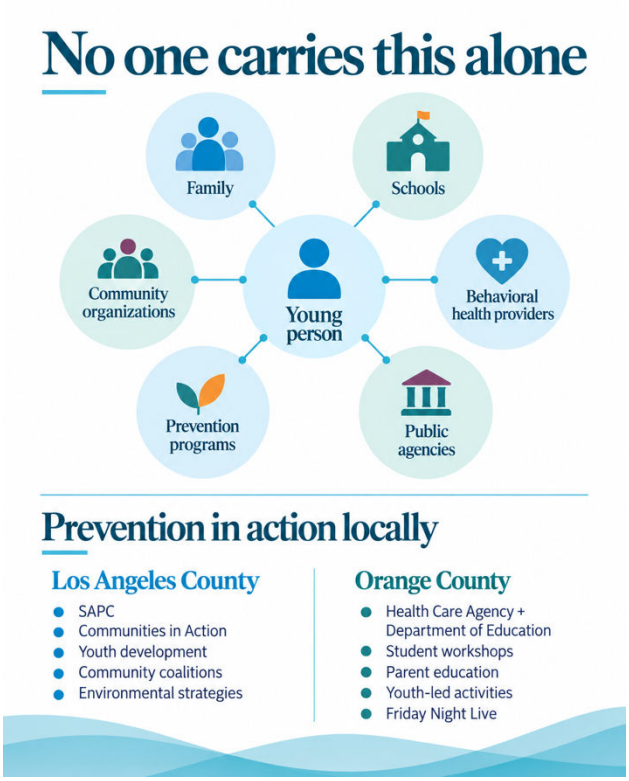
No one carries this alone

Parents matter enormously. So do teachers and schools. But none should be expected to do this work alone.

Los Angeles County's prevention model is built around that shared responsibility, bringing together students, parents, schools, public agencies, behavioral health providers, community organizations, local leaders and businesses to address substance use and the conditions that can contribute to it. Its prevention work reaches more than 100 schools and includes youth development, community coalitions and environmental strategies. [10]

PHCA's participation in Communities in Action, the prevention coalition for Los Angeles County's Service Planning Area 2, is one example of that community-based approach. [11]

Orange County offers another example. Through the Orange County Health Care Agency and Department of Education, schools can access no-cost substance use prevention services that include student workshops, multi-session curricula, parent and caregiver education and youth-led prevention activities. [12]



Friday Night Live takes youth involvement a step further, giving students an active role in developing prevention efforts in their own schools and communities. Administered by the Orange County Department of Education and funded by the OC Health Care Agency, the program also helps students in grades 4 through 12 build leadership and life skills. [13]

Orange County's prevention work also extends beyond campus. In an April 2026 article about prevention outreach in Garden Grove, Orange County Department of Education prevention education coordinator Stephan Lambert described partnerships reaching young people and families "beyond the school walls," while creating more opportunities for young people to have a voice in their communities. [14]

The same principle applies when a young person needs more than prevention alone.

A young person who is struggling with depression, trauma, family conflict or emerging substance use may need more than a prevention program. They may need a school counselor, behavioral health professional, wellness coach, family support, wraparound services or treatment. The sooner those needs are recognized, the greater the opportunity to respond before a problem becomes a crisis.

> “Prevention, early intervention and treatment shouldn’t operate in separate silos. A young person’s needs can change quickly, and families shouldn’t be left to figure out on their own what level of help is needed or where to find it. The goal is to recognize when more support is needed and connect them to the right help before a concern becomes a crisis.”
>
> — Susan Wood, LMFT
> Senior director of adolescent services, Phoenix Houses of California

For parents, teachers and other trusted adults, it starts with connection.

Pay attention when something changes. Make room for conversations without accusation or judgment. Take emotional distress seriously. Help young people develop healthier ways to manage difficult feelings, and when concerns persist or deepen, know where to turn for additional support.

Prevention often shows up in small ways. A young person talks instead of shutting down. Handles a difficult moment differently. Knows which adult to turn to. Asks for help before things escalate.

Those small changes matter.

Helping young people thrive

No prevention program can eliminate every risk a young person will face. Nor can every experience with substance use be traced to trauma, depression, social media or any single cause.

Those reasons are more complicated than any one explanation.

But decades of prevention work point to a broader understanding of what can help: credible information instead of exaggerated warnings. Skills young people can actually use. Relationships they can trust. Families that are supported rather than left to figure everything out alone. Schools and communities that recognize when a young person is struggling. And access to help before that struggle becomes a crisis.

At its best, prevention helps create the conditions for young people to make healthy decisions, navigate challenges and thrive.

That is a much bigger job than telling young people not to use drugs. And it is why prevention has to begin long before a crisis.

SOURCES

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