If prevention programs are going to be effective in appealing to the sensibilities of urban youth and ultimately alter their behavior, they need to place diversity with respect to culture, class, and environment at the center of prevention efforts.

Designing for diversity: Incorporating cultural competence in prevention programs for urban youth

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Low-income urban youth of color frequently confront a wide variety of challenges and hardships that other young people do not experience. They are more likely to drop out of high school, more likely to be unemployed, more likely to experience poverty and be denied access to basic social services, and more likely to become pregnant during adolescence. These intensifying challenges come at a time when minority and foreign-born populations constitute the fastest-growing segment of the school-age population. Census projections indicate that these populations will continue to expand due to the ongoing influx of immigrants, with the largest numbers arriving from Mexico, Asia, and Latin America.

The prevalence of hardships that urban youth of color face has contributed to the notion that this group is by its very nature at risk, and promotes stereotypes depicting these youth as irresponsible, antisocial, and even dangerous. In some cases, social scientists have
contributed to this discourse by suggesting that urban youth are products of a pathological “culture of poverty” that renders them incapable of overcoming environmental hardships.6 Wide acceptance of such views among policymakers and the media has given rise to a broad set of punitive policies aimed at controlling the behavior of urban youth through security, law enforcement, and incarceration.7

A more positive approach to helping urban youth avoid high-risk behaviors is engaging them in prevention programs. Although some programs are successful, many are not effective in reaching diverse urban youth. In this chapter, we focus on the delivery of substance abuse prevention programs and offer an alternative program strategy—one that places diversity with respect to culture, class, and environment at the center of prevention efforts. Such an approach, we argue, is effective not only in appealing to the sensibilities of urban youth but also in altering their behavior. We believe that the core principles of this strategy are appropriate for many programs hoping to engage and have a positive impact on the lives of low-income youth of color.

**About substance abuse and prevention**

For most individuals, initiation into drug and alcohol use occurs during adolescence or early adulthood.8 For many, early use is little more than a form of experimentation, but for a small but significant segment of the population, early use is the start to a long-term pattern of substance abuse. Understanding what might be done to reduce and prevent substance abuse among adolescents is increasingly recognized as an essential component of any comprehensive national prevention strategy.

Although the potential benefits of these programs are clear, many schools and community-based initiatives to curtail drug and alcohol use are ineffective because they are not tailored to meet the cultural sensibilities of diverse adolescent populations.9 The messages and strategies adopted by most prevention programs have been designed for a white, middle-class recipient population and often are not effective in reaching student populations that are
diverse with respect to race, language, culture, and socioeconomic status. Kumpfer, Alvarado, Smith, and Bellamy explain why cultural mismatch is endemic to the design of many prevention programs: “The theoretical constructs, definitions of protective or risk factors, appropriate interventions of strategies, and research evaluation strategies have all been influenced by mainstream American values.”

This chapter draws on the findings from research we have conducted in an urban high school located in the center of a large metropolitan area. The student population at the school was 96.9 percent nonwhite. More than two-thirds of the students were either first- or second-generation immigrants; 8.5 percent had come to the United States within the past three years. In addition, more than two-thirds came from homes where English was not the language spoken. Despite the diversity of the student population, educators at the school implemented a standard mainstream substance abuse prevention program that was being used with high school students throughout the country.

The goals of our research were to illuminate why such approaches to substance abuse prevention may be ineffective, as well as to make the case for greater attention to the need for cultural tailoring in the materials and approaches used with diverse student populations. We thus describe the concepts of cultural tailoring in the context of prevention programs. Throughout our discussion, we offer recommendations we believe will be useful to prevention programs and other programs seeking to engage and improve the outcomes for low-income youth of color.

**Cultural tailoring: Surface level**

Research has shown that cultural tailoring must be reflected in the surface structure of a prevention program so that interventions are matched to the observable social and behavioral characteristics of the target groups. According to Pasick, D’Onofrio, and Otero-Sabogal, cultural tailoring is “the process of creating culturally sensitive interventions, often involving the adaptation of existing
materials and programs for racial/ethnic populations.” Cultural tailoring is a strategy that has been used to enhance the cultural relevance of educational materials in order to heighten receptivity to prevention messages. Without cultural tailoring, Castro and Alarcon warn, the messages of a prevention program may be ineffective for diverse groups of learners.

Successful cultural tailoring results in surface structures that are more likely to increase receptivity, comprehension, and acceptance of messages. A critical component of surface-level cultural tailoring is to provide instruction and information in a language and idiom that recipients understand. This entails more than merely translating text-based information. It may also require that materials be modified in ways that are appealing and relevant to the cultural codes and social norms of adolescents. At the school where our research was conducted, 17.1 percent of students were identified as English Language Learners, but remarkably, prevention materials were available only in English.

Surface tailoring requires more than an understanding of the heritage and language of the target population. It is equally important that an understanding of students’ daily lives—the challenges they face outside school, the way they interact within school, and their typical patterns of behavior—be incorporated into program design and into the training of those who will implement the prevention program. For substance abuse prevention, this also entails knowing the types of alcohol or drugs commonly used by the student population.

Surface tailoring should also recognize typical concerns of a target recipient group. For high school students, daily concerns often relate to social pressures; alcohol and drug use may be driven by peer pressure and a desire to fit in. For example, Velez and Ungemack found that peer modeling was the strongest predictor of drug involvement among Puerto Rican youth. To minimize substance use risks, a prevention program must encourage students to talk about pressures they perceive in their environment and the ways in which patterns of substance use may be normalized within their environment. Such conversations are essential to facilitate the development of refusal skills and resiliency that enable students to
resist perceived peer pressure. Because different ethnic/racial groups may have different perceptions of peer pressure and different methods to deal with social influences, a prevention program must be adaptive to accommodate diverse student needs.

In economically depressed areas, students may experience pressure to sell drugs as a source of income. Research has shown that where poverty is concentrated and options for employment are limited, the lure of drug trafficking may be powerful and difficult to resist. In such areas, the informal sector of the economy where illegal transactions in goods and services occur may provide a greater portion of the income to residents than the formal, legal sector. Under these circumstances, prevention campaigns that encourage young people to “just say no,” or even the threat of long prison sentences for dealers, may not be enough to deter young people from entering the drug trade. To succeed in preventing young people from selling drugs, prevention programs may also have to address the pressures students face and the economic incentives that make it attractive.

Finally, research suggests that efforts to culturally tailor a prevention program with respect to its surface structure should incorporate members of the recipient group in program planning, development, and delivery. Hecht et al. found that minority youth were more responsive to programs in which their input was encouraged. They also tended to respond favorably to teachers delivering the prevention program who were familiar with the challenges they faced in their community or were members of their own ethnic/racial group.

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**Cultural tailoring: Deep level**

Research has shown that cultural tailoring must also entail deep-level program adaptations, which reflect how cultural, social, psychological, environmental, and historical factors influence an individual’s health behaviors. As with surface structure, there are several ways to make a substance abuse prevention program culturally relevant at the deep structural level. Stemming from her research involving Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong refugees,
Frye recommends integrating cultural themes into health promotion messages and strategies. Specifically, Frye found that kinship solidarity and the search for equilibrium were dominant cultural themes that could be linked with health messages. In a similar vein, Gloria and Peregoy found that salient Latino values such as simpatia (sympathy), personalismo (personalism), familismo (familial ties), machismo (masculinity) and hembrismo (brotherhood), verguenza (pride), and espiritismo (spiritualism) could be incorporated into the structure of prevention programs. Finally, Wong and Piran found that in contrast to the Western culture’s emphasis on the need to be independent and develop an internal locus of control, Chinese culture stresses interdependence, collectivity, and an external locus. Such findings suggest that programs that reflect recognition of students’ cultural values, norms, and sensibilities can increase the receptivity of adolescents to underlying prevention messages.

To accomplish deep structural tailoring, research suggests that program implementers acknowledge differences in attitudes toward substance use among and between ethnically/racially diverse student groups. Research has identified consistent correlations between one’s cultural identification and his or her perspectives on health issues, receptivity to messages, and substance use behaviors. Orlandi explains, “An ethnic or racial group’s shared norms, beliefs, and expectations regarding alcohol and its effects shape the group members’ drinking habits, the ways in which the members behave while drinking, and their perceptions of personal and collective responsibility for the outcomes of drinking.”

Attitudes toward illicit drug use also tend to vary across cultures in predictable ways. Indian culture, for example, considers drug use a moral problem that brings dishonor to one’s community and can cause a family to lose prestige and pride. In Haiti and Cambodia, however, some narcotics are used for medicinal purposes. This practice may cause some immigrants from these countries to be more accepting of drug use in some circumstances. In addition, it has been known for many years that there is variance in the age at which adolescents may be regarded as adults and allowed to make
independent decisions about issues such as marriage, childbirth, and the use of controlled substances. Attention to cultural perspectives and norms increases the likelihood that students will be receptive to a program’s messages.

Deep-level cultural tailoring also requires an understanding of students’ family child-rearing norms, which also have been found to vary across cultures. Shakib et al. explain that there is ethnic variation in parenting characteristics and child-rearing practices, including parental expectations of the parent-child relationship, reliance on authority and control, discipline, and parental monitoring. Relative to middle-class and affluent whites, research has found that African Americans, Hispanics, and working-class whites are more likely to exhibit authoritative parenting styles. Catalano et al. found that African American parents tend to be proactive in setting rules and monitoring their child’s behavior during preadolescence, but tend to lessen the exercise of authority over their children as they grow older. This type of monitoring has been found to be a protective factor that prevents early substance use initiation, but it is less effective at deterring use during the riskier teen years.

In addition, factors related to immigration and the subsequent process of assimilation and acculturation have been linked to increased risk of substance abuse and should therefore be reflected in the deep-structural tailoring of a prevention program. Research has found that as acculturation progresses with greater exposure to the cultural norms prevalent in the United States, immigrant youth experience a noticeable decline in overall health and well-being and a greater propensity to engage in a variety of risk behaviors. Similarly, a study described by Velez and Ungemack showed that drug use systematically increased with the number of years in which immigrants reported living in New York City. Finally, a study by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration revealed that although recent immigrants were less likely to engage in substance use than the U.S.-born population, immigrants who had been in the United States for ten years or longer reported drug use that was not significantly different from that of the native population. This research suggests that the vulnerability of adolescent
immigrants may be directly related to the stress resulting from acculturation to new societal norms, as well as to the concomitant transformation in social identity that adolescents experience during this period. Blake, Ledsky, Goodenow, and O’Donnell remind us that “as immigrants acculturate, they adopt norms, health, and risk behaviors of their immediate social reference groups and racial/ethnic peers.”

For all of the reasons cited, the literature suggests that a culturally competent substance abuse prevention program requires educators to have a thorough grasp of the language, values, belief systems, and challenges faced by the targeted recipient population. One may argue that it would be impossible for one program to reflect the unique cultural perspective of each student in highly diverse environments. However, Hecht et al. found that programs do not need to be narrowly tailored for each cultural or ethnic group. Rather, they should incorporate a representative level of relevant cultural elements and draw on images and themes from popular culture that are likely to resonate with a wide variety of young people. By offering a broad range of culturally relevant material and allowing students to bring their own cultural perspectives into group discussions, a program can achieve cultural competency.

Implications and conclusion

Our research findings have potential implications for improving prevention programs, some of which may be of value to programs seeking to serve the needs of urban youth of color. To minimize students’ risks, prevention programs should devote increased attention to informing students about the actual prevalence of adolescent substance use, which is lower than students typically perceive. Furthermore, programs should acknowledge potential ethnic/racial differences in students’ perceptions about peer substance use. Our study found that African American and U.S.-born students had higher estimates of peer drug use relative to other student groups. Because adolescents tend to conform to what they perceive to be
normal peer behavior, these higher estimates of peer substance use may indicate that these student groups are at a heightened risk for using substances.

In our study, immigrant students had lower-frequency estimates of peer drug use relative to U.S.-born students. It is possible that with increased time in the United States, immigrant youth’s social norms perceptions will become more closely matched to those reported by U.S.-born students. Over time, these changes may result in actual substance use increases among the immigrant student groups. To combat this risk, prevention programs should take advantage of the window of opportunity when immigrants are highly receptive to prevention education. Specifically, prevention programs may benefit from promoting resiliency and refusal skills among immigrant youth. Such skills may help these students resist perceived peer pressure during the acculturation process, a period during which Bhattacharya and other researchers revealed that immigrants often initiate substance use.

Findings from our study suggest that youth tend to overestimate the prevalence of substance use and the social pressures to engage in substance use. To help correct these misperceptions, prevention programs should encourage students to communicate with each other openly in facilitated workshops about pressures that exist within their environment. The availability of positive peer role models may provide students with the opportunity to disengage from a peer cluster that may put them at high risk for substance abuse. An obvious way a school can foster student communication is by engaging students in program development and implementation. Research attests to the success of peer-based strategies.

Developing strategies to better integrate the realities that low-income urban youth of color face into prevention and youth development programs is essential to effectively offsetting the wide variety of risks they face. As suggested by our study as well as previous research, prevention initiatives are more likely to be effective if they take diversity with respect to language, culture, class, and environment into account throughout program development and implementation. Although such programs are unlikely to counter the structural factors that place large numbers of urban youth at risk...
(economic marginalization, housing, and job shortages, for example), they can help in promoting resilience and relief from some of the hardships urban youth endure.

Notes


33. Hecht et al. (2003).

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