

What is a Student Assistance Program?

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This program provides substance abuse prevention and intervention services to all students in the school through formal educational presentations and informal SAP interactions with students, staff, teachers, families, and the general school community in order to delay the age of first use of substances. Activities that can delay first use of substances are important because research has demonstrated that delaying the age of first use of drugs and alcohol decreases the likelihood of developing dependence by 4-5% with each year onset is delayed. (Grant BF, Dawson DA: Age of onset of drug use and its association with DSM-IV drug abuse and dependence: results from the National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic Survey. J Substance Abuse 10(2):163-73, 1998) Services are generally offered to students in grades 6-12, while in some schools they are provided to grades K-5 as well.

Student assistance counselors are an integral part of the schools they serve and participate in school educational support teams to coordinate services to students. While the counselors have expertise in the substance abuse field, they also address other issues a student may have, referring to professionals both within and outside of the school as appropriate.

The programs are funded primarily through the Vermont Department of Health, Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs. School districts often supplement the grant to expand the program. Services are available to all students in the school and, on average, counselors provide one on one and tailored group support to 10% of the students in a school.

The program focuses on prevention to reduce future risky behavior and improve academic performance. One of the benefits of the program is that any student/family can utilize the services, without regard to a diagnosis or insurance. The program is immediate and open to all staff as well as students. It also provides immediate crisis intervention. Much of this assistance is provided through one-on-one sessions with a SAP counselor or participation in a counselor led small group. Where current problems are particularly serious, the SAP counselors can provide a link to outside treatment services. These students have multiple reasons for using the program. Issues range from substance use, family conflicts, behavioral problems, and physical health issues to mental health issues such as cutting and suicidal ideation. Many are troubled students and at higher grade levels, are students who are at risk to drop out of school.

SAP counselors and teams identify students with substance use problems, intervene, and when necessary, refer them to community agencies for more specialized or intensive services. Since SAP counselors and teams are continually interacting with students, they can identify students having problems through direct observation. Students may also be referred to counselors by teachers, parents, peers, or may seek help themselves. The counselors then screen students using validated screening tools (CRAFFT, MAYSI, GAIN-SS) and may refer them to local human service agencies for formal assessment and treatment. SAP teams and counselors follow-up with students to ensure they obtain the treatment they need and support students returning from treatment.

SAP counselors and teams also:

- give educational presentations to students and community groups
- work with community resources to develop services for students

- train school staff to deal with troubled students
- meet with concerned families
- increase awareness of substance use problems in the community
- allow teachers to concentrate on education instead of having to deal with substance use
- participate in educational support groups

Student Assistance Programs complement existing programs such as school-based health clinics, classroom substance abuse prevention curricula, peer leadership programs, and community mental health agencies.