



PennState

PROSPER conference convenes experts and youth to help prevent substance abuse

Surge in vaping, need for evidence-based prevention programs among concerns discussed

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PROSPER conference attendees Christy Tomascik and Will, Annabelle and Lola Wojciechowski

Image: Sara Brennen/Penn State

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UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — “We are now addressing a generation that could become addicted if they take a pill a few times. Prevention is critical,” said Steve Forzato, deputy chief of statewide drug initiatives for the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General, to the audience assembled May 14 at the Ruth Pike Auditorium for the 17th annual PROSPER statewide conference.

The PROSPER (PROmoting school-community-university Partnerships to Enhance Resilience) conference brought together representatives from Penn State and Pennsylvania state agencies and school districts, to share recent developments in addressing substance misuse among middle school youth.

“They are inhaling e-liquids into their lungs and bloodstream, and they may have no idea what is in them,” said Craig Zettle, vice president of Botvin LifeSkills Training.

“Vaping, cigarettes and e-cigarettes are harmful. We need to keep our foot on the gas pedal by addressing youth smoking overall, not just going in the direction of vaping.”

He cited the importance of using the Pennsylvania Youth Survey to determine trends in substance misuse, noting that many states do not have access to such data.

“We’re stuck in a whack-a-mole board of problems, including bullying and abuse of various substances, and the game keeps getting faster.”

“There are so many common risk and protective factors, that you don’t need a separate program to prevent use of each different substance,” added Janet Welsh, associate research professor in the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center.

Zettle recommended sharing statistics with youth to help them make informed decisions, especially given the misinformation that they might hear from advertising, peers and sometimes adults.

Changes in behavior come from skill development

PROSPER gives families tools to prepare their children to make smart decisions and how to be assertive when confronted with a new situation.

“I feel like my kids have learned so much about peer pressure resistance skills, looking at things from their parents’ point of view, communication skills, and what makes a good friend,” said Christy Tomascik, prevention coordinator for Luzerne and Northumberland counties.

“I learn something new each time I teach the program, for example, how to use 'I' statements, to conduct family team meetings, and about kids’ stresses.”

Tomascik's children, three of whom attended the conference – Annabelle, Will and Lola Wojciechowski – all said that participating in the PROSPER program brought them closer together as a family and taught them the skills to resist peer pressure.

PROSPER across Pennsylvania

Through the PROSPER program, Penn State researchers and extension educators are partnering to build resilient families and provide research-based drug abuse prevention programs across Pennsylvania.

“We know that our programs build resilience and helps people along their path,” said Denise Continenza, Penn State Extension educator from Lehigh County.

Addressing the PROSPER team members in the room, she said, “You are the advocates and cheerleaders. Thank you for all you have done.”

“Building community engagement to address substance misuse is distinctive strength of Penn State, and you are an important part of that work,” said Stephanie Lanza, director of the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center and interim director of the Consortium to Combat Substance Abuse.

“PROSPER can have sweeping impact because of all of the people we can touch.”

READ MORE about how the PROSPER program uses evidence-based programming to fight substance abuse and addiction at impact.psu.edu.

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