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## Westview offers strength for families, skills for youth

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By Hugh Gray - Contributing Columnist



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Looking down the hallway outside Westview's Empowering Families program, you'll see pictures of dozens of families who have dedicated many hours in a program called Strengthening Families.

More than 200 family members have been a part of Westview's Strengthening Families, which is actually a nationally and internationally recognized parenting and family-strengthening program. The program is evidence-based and grows family skills to significantly reduce problem behaviors, delinquency, and alcohol and drug abuse in children. The program is also designed to improve social competencies and school performance. Child maltreatment also decreases as parents strengthen bonds with their children and learn more effective parenting skills.

"I learned a lot about structure and how to implement that into our lives. I knew that we had some challenges around the way I disciplined. I'd yell a lot. Apparently that wasn't getting my point across so I've learned to pull back, take a breath, maybe not yell as much, and be more clear in my directions," said Renee Chapman, an SFP parent graduate and mother to two sons.

Through a series of family meetings, participants are exposed to science-based parenting skills, children's life skills, and family life skills training specifically designed for at-risk families. The program is focused on children ages 6-11.

The Strengthening Families Program courses are delivered in 14 sessions (two and a half hours each). Typically, the sessions are preceded by a meal that includes informal family practice time and group leader coaching. Each group may include up to 14 families. During each session, participants gather in three groups: parents, children, and then come together as a family. The sessions will focus on developing positive family strengths, teaching families how to stay resilient, improving parenting skills, decreasing the use of corporal punishment, reducing family conflict and reducing parent drug use. The program will also help children with social skills and relationships.

For this series of meetings, something new is added to the program. It's a curriculum called LifeSkills. which is an evidence-based substance abuse prevention program designed to reduce the risks of alcohol, tobacco, drug abuse, and violence among young people.

“Through the LifeSkills Training Program, the students have the opportunity to become more successful, more confident, and have a positive outlook on life. The skills taught pertain to the students' situation. We have a current group of 11-12 graders that are in the Transitions group, meaning they are taught skills to help them become successful as young adults. The young people in this group look forward to the next lesson and talk about it throughout the week,” said Heather Davenport, prevention specialist with Westview and one of the LifeSkills facilitators.

The program uses a broad-brush approach by improving skills in three areas. These skill areas include drug resistance skills, personal self-management skills and general social skills. In the drug resistance component, young people develop their ability to recognize and challenge common misconceptions about tobacco, alcohol and other drug use. Through coaching and practice, they learn information and practical drug resistance skills for dealing with peers and media pressure to engage in alcohol and other drug use.

The personal self-management component teaches students how to examine their self-image and its effects on behavior; set goals and keep track of personal progress; identify everyday decisions and how they may be influenced by others; analyze problem situations, and consider the consequences of each alternative solution before making decisions; reduce stress and anxiety, and look at personal challenges in a positive light.

In the social skills component, students develop the necessary skills to overcome shyness, communicate effectively and avoid misunderstandings, initiate and carry out conversations, handle social requests, utilize both verbal and nonverbal assertiveness skills to make or refuse requests, and recognize that they have choices other than aggression or passivity when faced with tough situations.

For more information about participation in the Strengthening Families Initiative, contact Linda Gault at 803-276-5690. If you would like to discuss the LifeSkills program as a stand-alone service for your youth group or class, contact Heather Davenport at 803-276-5690.

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