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PROSPER Program continues to respond to families' educational needs

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Kristie Auman-Bauer

April 23, 2020

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruptions for Pennsylvanians, including the closing of schools and the interruption of other educational programs. Penn State's PROmoting School-community-university Partnerships to Enhance Resilience (PROSPER) project is continuing to connect and engage Pennsylvania families and keep schools informed.

Through the PROSPER program, Penn State researchers and extension educators partner to build resilient families and provide research-based prevention programs across Pennsylvania. According to Janet Welsh, PROSPER field director and associate research professor of health and human development and senior research associate with the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, school closures caused an abrupt interruption of several of PROSPER's evidence-based prevention programs.

"The Strengthening Families Program: for Parents and Youth 10-14 (SFP 10-14) is a seven-week drug and alcohol prevention program offered to parents and caregivers and their 10 to 14-year old youth. It is conducted outside of school and includes a family meal followed by a two-hour session," Welsh explained. "LifeSkills Training is a 15-lesson drug, alcohol, tobacco, and violence prevention program taught during school in sixth through eighth grades by trained teachers and instructors."

Penn State Extension educators along with Welsh and Geneen Burris, Penn State's Evidence-based Prevention and Intervention Support program specialist, brainstormed ideas on how they could continue to connect and engage families who were participating in the programs and keep schools informed.

"We developed a plan to create articles about some of the topics covered in SFP 10-14 and post them to the Penn State Extension website. This not only provides families with valuable information about communicating and problem-solving, but may also entice families to register for future programs," said Christy Tomascik, Penn State Extension educator.

In addition, PROSPER team leaders continue to communicate electronically with families, reminding them of the ideas and strategies they learned while attending the program.

Online options for the PROSPER programs are also being explored. "LifeSkills Training will hopefully be offered to students as part of their remote learning," said Karen Thomas, Penn State Extension educator. "SFP 10-14 may be more challenging considering the high level of personal interactions. However, specific session messages

with summaries, tips, and activities are being sent home to currently participating families.”

“The uncertainty of what lays ahead makes planning for future prevention programs difficult, but PROSPER Extension educators are supporting districts and families with resources and stand ready to assist when needed,” said Thomas.

The PROSPER program is a collaboration between researchers and Penn State Extension educators, representatives from school districts, community agencies and organizations, as well as past parents and youth participants. Since starting research in 2001 with a sample of more than 11,000 children, PROSPER has seen significant improvements in family life and youth development, as well as reductions in teenage delinquency and substance abuse.

MEDIA CONTACTS

Kristie Auman-Bauer, kma147@psu.edu

Work Phone: 814-865-7011

Last Updated April 23, 2020