

PROJECT ALERT

Adolescent
Learning
Experiences in
Resistance
Training

PROGRAM OVERVIEW



PROJECT ALERT

AN EVIDENCE-BASED SUBSTANCE USE PREVENTION PROGRAM
FOR MIDDLE SCHOOLERS

This curriculum is published by the RAND Corporation, adapted from an original curriculum developed and tested by RAND with funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.





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Overview of Curriculum

Project ALERT is an evidence-based curriculum proven to motivate middle school students against substance use, provide skills and strategies to resist drugs, and establish non-use attitudes and beliefs.

Project ALERT uses the power of practice and repetition to give students the self-efficacy, skills, and resources to resist peer pressure and misleading, pro-drug messaging. It works on two levels: helping students reduce their current substance use—or avoid experimenting in the first place.

Statistics and long-term survey research demonstrate Project ALERT's success. Unlike most other programs, Project ALERT has been, and continues to be, thoroughly tested in multi-year, multi-community studies. This scientific evidence means that administrators and teachers can be confident about what the program delivers, who it impacts, and the effort involved in making its results last.

Project ALERT is designed to be delivered over two years. In the first year, 7th grade students receive the initial 11 lessons, or Core Curriculum of Project ALERT. Eighth grade students receive three Booster Lessons in the second year that are critical for maintaining early prevention gains.

Both the Core Curriculum and the Booster Lessons offer a variety of activities, audiovisual materials, student handouts, and homework assignments.

Core Lessons

The initial 11 lessons are organized into four parts, shown below. The lessons build on each other and should be taught in consecutive order. The concepts stressed in each lesson are:

1. Motivating nonuse (Lessons 1-3), and safe, legal use of prescription medications and risks of misuse (Lesson 8);
2. Identifying pressures to use drugs, learning to resist those pressures, and practicing resistance skills (Lessons 4-6);

3. Reviewing key concepts and practicing resistance skills (Lessons 7, 9, 11);
4. Motivating smoking and vaping cessation (Lesson 10).

Starting in Lesson 5, and repeated in 6, 7, 8, 9, and 11, Project ALERT focuses on building resistance skills – different ways to say “no.” The curriculum employs the model→practice→feedback approach, a proven method in skills building. Teachers use classroom posters to reinforce knowledge communicated in the lessons. Modeling is accomplished through viewing videos of older teens demonstrating effective ways to say “no.” Students are given several practice sessions where they role play their own ways to say “no.” The curriculum asks teachers to provide feedback by giving “resistance self-efficacy statements” immediately following each role play (see the Teaching Strategies sections for more detail on instructional strategies incorporated into lessons).

In contrast to Project ALERT’s overall prevention focus, the lesson on smoking and vaping cessation is directed at a specific group – regular nicotine users. It helps motivate them to stop using tobacco and models successful quitting behavior. It also teaches nonusers how to help others quit and how to change unhealthy behavior.

Below is an overview of each 7th grade lesson.

Lesson One: Introduction to Project ALERT

Introduces Project ALERT to students, sets the tone for the program, and clarifies reasons why people do and don’t use substances.

Lesson Two: Consequences of Using Nicotine and Marijuana

Motivates students to resist substance use by having them identify immediate and later consequences of vaping and smoking nicotine and marijuana; and increases students’ perceptions that using nicotine and marijuana impacts their daily lives and social relationships.

Lesson Three: Consequences of Drinking Alcohol

Identifies reasons why people drink alcohol; demonstrates similarities between drinking and marijuana; presents how alcohol is used to cover feelings; discusses consequences of drinking; and brainstorms alternatives to drinking.

Lesson Four: Introduction to Pressures

Marks the transition into the skill-building section of the curriculum; helps students resist pressures to use drugs by identifying what the different pressures are and where they come from; and counters the belief that “everyone uses” with up-to-date survey

information indicating that most teenagers do not use substances.

Lesson Five: Social Pressures to Use Substances

Provides the first example of the modeling→practice→feedback strategy used throughout the curriculum; identifies social pressures to use drugs; and teaches resistance skills and facilitates saying “no” in social situations.

Lesson Six: Resisting Internal and External Pressures to Use Drugs

Identifies internal pressures to use drugs; and students discuss and practice resistance techniques for internal and external pressures.

Lesson Seven: Practicing Resistance Skills

Facilitates practice of resisting external pressures to use drugs; presents additional ways to resist pressure; and encourages students to openly express feelings of being capable of resisting internal pressures.

Lesson Eight: Safe, Legal Use of Prescription Medications and Risks of Misuse

Explains the safe, legal use of prescription opioids, and other prescription drugs, and explains how misuse can become addictive or life-threatening; presents information on brain functioning and how to promote brain health; and provides students with resistance skills and self-efficacy to refuse and resist the misuse of prescription drugs.

Lesson Nine: Reviewing and Practicing Resistance Techniques

Reinforces earlier lessons by reviewing resistance techniques and facilitating resistance practice; and introduces the concept of benefits from not using drugs.

Lesson Ten: Smoking and Vaping Cessation

Identifies why it is hard to quit vaping/smoking; offers techniques for quitting and changing general behavior.

Lesson Eleven: Benefits of Not Using Drugs

Reviews and reinforces negative consequences of using drugs; motivates resistance by reviewing benefits of not using drugs; and elicits written commitments from students.

Booster Lessons

The three Booster Lessons reinforce the Core Curriculum and should be taught in consecutive order in 8th grade. The concepts stressed in each lesson are:

1. Motivating resistance to drugs (Booster Lesson 1).

2. Resisting internal and external pressures to use drugs (Booster Lesson 2).
3. Reinforcing benefits of resisting drugs (Booster Lesson 3).

Below we provide a brief overview of each booster lesson.

Booster Lesson One: Motivating Resistance to Use Drugs

Re-introduces Project ALERT; reviews consequences of nicotine, marijuana, alcohol; reviews the safe use of prescription medications and risks of misuse; and reviews sources of pressure.

Booster Lesson Two: Resisting External and Internal Pressures

Reviews concept of external and internal pressures; and students prepare and act out internal pressure skits.

Booster Lesson Three: Reinforcing Benefits of Resisting Drugs

Reviews the advantages of resistance and discusses how friends can help each other resist pressure.

Lesson Format

Each lesson is organized into two sections: lesson overview and lesson plan. Student Handouts and other teacher supplements are standalone files.

Lesson Overview




On the first pages of each lesson, you will find an outline of goals and activities for that lesson, a summary description of what you hope to accomplish in the lesson, pre-class instruction on how to quickly prepare, and a checklist of materials needed. Specifically, you'll always see the following sections:

- **Lesson Goals.** These are the proximal goals for the lesson, and can be achieved in a single class. Lesson goals guide each activity. A student-friendly version of the lesson goals are in the introduction.
- **Scope and Sequence with Pacing Guidance.** This section lists the activities in the lesson with pacing guidance. We assume class periods of approximately 45 minutes to inform pacing guidance. If your class period is a different length, you will need to adjust accordingly.
- **Brief Lesson Plan Description.** This section provides a summary of the lesson in a few paragraphs. It explains how the activities align with the goals of the lesson.
- **Background Knowledge: Pre-Reading.** We embed the main

information teachers need to know before delivering the lesson in this section.

- **Materials and Supplies to Prepare.** In most lessons, the materials and supplies to prepare means confirming the Project ALERT posters and videos downloaded correctly. We recommend testing the technology necessary to display before delivering the lesson. Some lessons ask teachers to create charts to facilitate class discussions or small group activities. These can be electronic or paper charts, depending on your preferences.

The lesson overview concludes with a key of icons (shown below) to indicate what to say during the lesson, what to keep in mind as you facilitate the lesson, and what to display in the classroom throughout the lesson.

	What to display. This refers to the Project ALERT posters and videos. This also highlights charts or visuals to create before the lesson, and handouts that might be necessary
	What to say. We provide a script for the lesson. The scripts are intended to help you deliver the lesson as intended, to get positive outcomes for students. The bold text indicates what to say. The regular text indicates notes. Information presented within this section is essential to meeting the curriculum's objectives.
	What to keep in mind. This section provides suggested prompts to facilitate class discussions.

Lesson Plan

Each lesson begins with an introductory activity that communicates the goal of the lesson. Subsequent activities are aligned with the core components of the curriculum:

- *Teacher-facilitated class discussions*, that refer to Project ALERT posters and teacher-created visuals
- *Role Plays*, including Project ALERT videos and skits performed by students
- *Small group activities*, that include the Project ALERT posters and teacher-created visuals

The varied activities are designed to move at a quick pace to sustain students' interest and accommodate limited teaching schedules. Each lesson concludes with a “wrap-up” activity to acknowledge that the goal has been accomplished.

Instructional Materials

The Project ALERT Videos

Classroom videos support the lesson plans. Scenario videos help set up role play opportunities while candid interviews with older teens help seed discussion.

Scenario Videos

Pot: The Party Crasher

Lindsey's Choice

Pot or Not?

Paul's Fix

Candid Interviews with Older Teens

Let's Talk About Marijuana

Clearing the Air

Saying "No" to Drugs

Let's Talk about Prescription Drugs

Resisting Peer Pressure

The Project ALERT Posters

The classroom posters are designed to support the learning goals and reinforce visual learners.

Smoking and Vaping Make You Less Attractive

Nicotine Is Addicting

Vaping and Smoking Affect Your Heart and Lungs

Marijuana Can Affect You Right Away

Marijuana Can Damage You in the Long Run

Alcohol Can Harm You Any Time You Drink

Alcohol Can Damage You in the Long Run

Drinking to Cover Feelings

Ways to Say "No"

Pressures From Inside Yourself

Prescription Painkillers Go Straight to Your Head

Vaping Leads To...

Adolescent Thinking and Project ALERT

Much psychological research indicates that adolescents think differently than adults. These differences make adolescents more vulnerable to taking risks with their health.

The following differences are most relevant to preventing substance use and promoting resistance self-efficacy.

1. Difficulty in considering the future consequences of current decisions.
2. Difficulty in applying information about risks and consequences to themselves; that is, they often believe themselves to be immune to negative events. Some psychologists refer to this belief as “the myth of personal immortality.”
3. Tendency to discount known risks (*“Everyone in my family smokes, but no one has gotten lung cancer.”*).
4. Difficulty in understanding probability and its meaning for their own lives and health.
5. Poor decision-making skills. Of particular note is the tendency to discount long-term consequences in making decisions and a general inability to weigh costs and benefits to produce rational decisions.

The Project ALERT curriculum is designed to be sensitive to these differences. For example, it stresses immediate and short-term consequences of substance use in addition to long-term consequences. It emphasizes the possibility of alcohol-related accidents and points out that some health consequences occur with certainty if a person smokes cigarettes or marijuana even when the dosage is small.

The goal of Project ALERT is to reduce the use of substances by keeping nonusers from trying them and by preventing experimenters from becoming regular users.

Underlying Assumptions

The curriculum uses what we know about adolescent thinking to address students’ knowledge, attitudes/beliefs, intentions, and use of substances. Here are five assumptions that Project ALERT addresses throughout the curriculum.

Assumption 1: Adolescents start using drugs primarily because of social influences (e.g., peers, parents, siblings, media) and because they want to emulate behavior they view as mature and independent.

Implementation: The curriculum helps adolescents resist those social influences, by:

- a. countering arguments that substance use is widespread and desirable (most people don’t smoke; drugs don’t make you mature, independent), and

- b. teaching students specific resistance skills.

A unique feature of Project ALERT is its emphasis on helping students identify internal as well as external pressures to use drugs. Adolescents frequently fail to recognize the subtle but powerful ways we put pressure on ourselves - even when no one is specifically trying to influence us ("I'll be left out if I don't act like the others."). The Project ALERT videos portray these "pressures from inside and outside of ourselves," and role-playing exercises help students learn techniques for resisting them.

Assumption 2: Drug prevention programs must help students develop the motivation to resist using drugs. Teaching resistance skills requires more than just learning simple statements.

Implementation: The curriculum motivates nonuse through appeals that:

- a. relate directly to adolescents (stress immediate and social consequences of use),
- b. correct teenagers' perceptions around social norms (most teens don't do it), and
- c. are presented by credible communicators (older teenagers and helpful teachers).

Research on adolescents indicates that teenagers tend to discount long-term risks and overestimate substance use among their peers. To provide greater motivation, therefore, Project ALERT stresses how drugs can affect students **now**, in their daily lives and social relationships. It also counters the belief that "everyone uses" with actual statistics showing that users are in the minority.

The structure of each lesson and the teaching process are designed to increase learning and motivation. Studies have shown that the following strategies help increase motivation and build resistance skills:

- a. providing discrete or proximal goals that can be achieved in a single class lesson;
- b. actively involving students in the learning process;
- c. developing skills through demonstration and practice; and,
- d. encouraging self-efficacy through positive and task-specific feedback.

These strategies are an integral part of the curriculum.

Assumption 3: Drug prevention programs should target substances that are used first and most widely by young people.

Implementation: Because adolescents typically start using nicotine, marijuana, and alcohol before they try other drugs, Project ALERT focuses on these three substances. It also provides material on safe and legal use prescription medications and risks of misuse that middle school students should be warned about.

Assumption 4: Much adolescent behavior stems from modeling the behavior of admired others - in particular, older teenagers who are close in age and, therefore, understand their concerns but have the authority of greater experience.

Implementation: Videos portray older teenagers discussing why they say “no” and displaying resistance skills. Teachers are encouraged to describe how they resist pressures to use.

Assumption 5: Adolescents are much more likely to absorb new information and learn new skills when they are actively involved in the learning process.

Implementation: The curriculum promotes student involvement by:

- a. eliciting students’ responses rather than didactically explaining facts and values to them, and
- b. using techniques such as role-playing, games, and small group discussion to foster student participation and reinforce skills

Teaching Strategies

Self-efficacy, defined as an individual’s belief that he or she has the capacity to accomplish a particular task, must be established before the adoption of new and difficult behavior. If we expect students to resist drugs, we must help them feel they can do so. The core components of the Project ALERT lessons are: (1) teacher-facilitated class discussions, (2) role play, and (3) small group activities. The following instructional strategies occur throughout Project ALERT lessons to support the development of students resistance self-efficacy skills.

Modeling

Modeling is an important tool for teaching and increasing self-efficacy. In the Project ALERT videos, older teens act out typical scenarios and model resistance skills. By presenting these situations where teens say “no” to substances, effective ways of resisting are illustrated. Eliciting feedback after the videos with questions like, “What do you think of the way they interacted with each other?” and “What else could they have said to resist?” can build on the concept of students modeling resistance behaviors.

Active Student Involvement

We've integrated activities for student participation into the Project ALERT curriculum. Research demonstrates that people learn more, remember more, and feel more effective when they are actively involved in the learning process. Project ALERT activities encourage such participation by inviting students to: make lists of reasons to not use; discuss videos; role play; rewrite alcohol, tobacco, e-cigarette, and marijuana ads; draft "saying 'no'" responses; and suggest alternative behaviors.

Reinforcement

Several techniques can be used to reinforce what students learn in Project ALERT. You can use verbal reinforcement methods, such as repeating or summarizing correct responses and solutions, elaborating on a student's response and connecting it with other material, and providing positive feedback on what the student said or did. Honest, direct praise can be motivating. Some examples are:

- You really know how to say 'no.'
- That's a good way to resist. That sounded very convincing.
- You sounded in charge.
- You handled that well.
- I like the way you worded that; I would have stopped pressuring you.
- That sounded powerful.
- That was a mature way of responding.
- So, what I'm hearing you say is that you might do the following in this situation. (summary)
- Excellent answer! Several of you mentioned that you would respond in a similar way." (connecting w/other material)
- You're on the right track. Can you think of any other ways?
- I like how you put that.
- I never thought of that!

Nonverbal methods include classroom applause, smiling, nodding, or a thumbs-up sign.

Validation

Validation means acknowledging students' feelings, sometimes even before the feelings are vocalized. Examples include acknowledging that (1) it is hard to identify and resist pressure, (2) pro-alcohol and drug advertising is powerful, and (3) students are not expected to know all the answers.

- Wow – those are some strong opinions, but very valuable for us to hear. Thanks.
- That must have been a really difficult experience/time for you. I'm glad you felt comfortable sharing it with us.
- Great suggestion. How easy or difficult would it be to do that?
- Yes – good point. There are so many influences around us. Can you think of any others?
- Consequences can have serious effects, can't they? But they can also be great teachers. Can you think of a different response you might have next time?

Respect

Students who are treated with respect are more receptive and motivated. Respectful treatment includes listening carefully and acknowledging what students say. It also includes responding gently to a wrong answer by acknowledging any truth in it, validating the students' feelings (e.g., "*Many people think that.*"), and presenting the correct answer. Teachers increase their credibility and contribute to a climate of respect by avoiding judgmental statements, acknowledging that the students ultimately make the decision about using drugs, and clarifying that no one can make them use drugs if they don't want to.

Proximal Goals

Each lesson begins with a statement of proximal goals, or what students will accomplish that day. Beginning Project ALERT lessons in this way helps prepare the student for the session. Further, research shows stating proximal goals promotes learning and self-efficacy. These goals are listed first in each lesson and should guide each activity. At the end of each lesson, the teacher reinforces the students' abilities to achieve them.

Teaching Project ALERT As Designed

Implementation research has shown that student outcomes are dependent on the quality of the curriculum and the way in which it is taught. When Project ALERT was first evaluated, teachers were asked to teach the curriculum exactly as it was written. The evaluation demonstrated that Project ALERT was effective in preventing substance use.

To get the best results for Project ALERT, you need to deliver it as designed. This means teaching each Project ALERT lesson with fidelity – i.e., including all of the activities, and teaching them in the prescribed sequence.

An Activity Checklist accompanies each Project ALERT Lesson. The checklist follows the scope and sequence of the lesson plan while identifying the core components that lead to positive student outcomes. Broadly, the core components are:

- **Ground Rules**, which establish the safe and supportive teaching environment.
- **Introduction**, focusing on the proximal goals that promote learning and self-efficacy.
- **Teacher-facilitated class discussions**, which help students learn about the consequences of using substances and the benefits of non-use, while also getting better equipped with skills to resist internal and external pressures to use substances.
- **Role plays**, where students can practice drug refusal skills to resist pressures to use alcohol and other drugs.
- **Small group activities**, where students can practice with peers and apply what they have learned.
- **Wrap-up**, which reinforces what students accomplished in the lesson.

Using all of these core components is critical to ensuring successful program delivery and achieving student outcomes. The Activity Checklists are an opportunity to reflect on the extent to which the core components were implemented as designed. You, as the teacher, can rate each aspect of the lesson as delivered: (1) completely, (2) partially, or (3) not at all. **Knowing how you did in a lesson can help you improve your delivery the next time.** If possible, invite a colleague to observe a Project ALERT lesson and build a community of reflective Project ALERT practice.

Tips for Teaching Project ALERT as Designed

- Make sure enough time is scheduled to complete the curriculum. This means blocking out eleven class periods during the first year of the program (7th grade) and three class periods in the booster year (8th grade).
- A weekly interval - one lesson per week - is best practice. A schedule of eleven consecutive weeks is recommended because this gives students the time needed to learn resistance skills, practice them in real life, and reinforce resistance skills to mastery.
- When time limitations require modifying the curriculum, make decisions that are consistent with Project ALERT design. Student participation has been built into the curriculum whenever possible and should be kept in. A teacher who is short of time could have the students write down fewer reasons in an activity or have fewer student groups report out on an activity rather than the teacher switching to a lecture format or omitting the activity altogether.
- Learning is enhanced through systematic repetition of material. Project ALERT intentionally presents information and concepts more than once and in different ways. The repeated material should not be left out, because students need this repetition to learn and practice resistance skills.
- If you need help, contact the Project ALERT team by sending an email to projectalert@rand.org.

Tips for Enhancing Project ALERT to Make It Your Own

- Keep the curriculum fresh by making connections to other ways students might face negative or positive pressures in their lives. For instance, peer pressure is not always negative. Examine ways in which friends can put pressure on friends to get in shape or to participate in school-sponsored events.
- If you are artistic, use your talent in preparing the many visuals used in the curriculum. Or feel free to ask the students to help make the curriculum's charts.
- Outside of Project ALERT lessons, teachers may expand the conversation about substance use to include current events, discussions about local drug issues, or projects that involve students in community-wide drug prevention initiatives.

Handling Difficult Issues

Students might ask questions that can be uncomfortable, or you might learn information about students and families that raise concerns. Here, we offer some tips about how to handle those situations.

How can I reassure students that what they say in the classroom will be treated confidentially?

It is important for you to know that Project ALERT activities are specifically designed to avoid personal disclosure of sensitive information. The Ground Rules developed in Lesson 1 should include the following: “no names or identifying descriptions (‘my parents’) should be used.” This rule applies to both the teacher and students. Students can be encouraged to share their story or issue, if relevant, by saying “someone I know.....”

You should be aware of state and district reporting and confidentiality policies and tell students about those requirements. A place to do this is written into the curriculum in Lesson 1. You should also be prepared to direct students to appropriate school staff with whom they can talk confidentially.

What should I say if students ask me if I have ever used drugs?

How you answer these questions depends on several factors:

- your teaching style;
- how accustomed you are to revealing personal information about yourself to students (you should never feel pressured to reveal information about yourself when you are uncomfortable doing so); and,
- your history of substance use.

You can point to state or district policy on use of drugs as a rationale for resisting illegal drugs. This type of answer models skills you will teach students in Project ALERT lessons. If you use legal drugs and you wish to disclose this information, it is recommended that you add a health-enhancing message to your response. For example, you might say, “Yes, *unfortunately I do smoke, but I am trying to quit. If I had had a program like this at your age, I probably wouldn’t have even started*” or, “Yes, *I have a drink on occasion, but I never drive after drinking.*” We **strongly** discourage lengthy discussions about anyone’s personal use of legal or illegal drugs, including your own.

What should I say when a student discloses substance use information about him or herself, a family member, or friend?

Occasionally, students want to tell war stories or talk about personal or other people's substance use. First, it is important to discourage lengthy discussion about anyone's personal use of legal or illegal drugs. You can refer to the confidentiality ground rule, which can be worded to prohibit the mentioning of anyone's name when discussing sensitive issues.

If a student suggests they have a drug problem, remember that it is not a teacher's role to diagnose or treat students' behavioral problems. The teacher's role is to facilitate getting help for the student. Sometimes a student will be forthright in his/her expression of the problem; often teachers have to rely on more subtle signs. If you suspect a student needs support for substance use, make a referral to counseling.

What if I think or discover that one of my students has a substance use problem?

If you suspect a student needs support for substance use, make a referral to counseling. Know your referral process. Familiarize yourself with this process before you start teaching Project ALERT, both as information for you and a heads up to counseling staff.