



# Executive Summary

## Emily's Hope Substance Use Prevention Curriculum

*An Evidence-Based Approach to Substance Use Prevention for K-12 Students*

### Introduction

Substance use disorder (SUD) is a growing crisis affecting millions of individuals and families across the United States. Early education is a key prevention strategy, yet evidence-based substance use prevention curricula for elementary school students remain scarce. Emily's Hope Substance Use Prevention Curriculum was developed to fill this gap by providing a science-based, developmentally appropriate, and engaging educational program designed to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and strategies to make healthy choices.

The curriculum integrates interactive lessons, engaging narratives, and real-world applications to help students understand how substance use affects the brain, body, and behavior. It also addresses social pressures, emotional regulation, and decision-making skills, empowering students to navigate challenges effectively. The program is aligned with National Health Education Standards and ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors and has been piloted in multiple schools, demonstrating promising results in student learning and behavior.

### Program Goals

The **Emily's Hope Substance Use Prevention Curriculum** aims to:

- ✓ Provide accurate, age-appropriate education on the risks and effects of substance use.
- ✓ Teach students about brain development and the impact of substances on cognitive function
- ✓ Promote critical thinking and decision-making skills to resist peer pressure and high-risk behaviors.
- ✓ Instill healthy coping mechanisms to manage emotions and stress without turning to substances.
- ✓ Enhance community and family engagement through school-based education and prevention efforts.
- ✓ Foster long-term retention of prevention messages through ongoing reinforcement and curriculum continuity.

## Curriculum Structure & Approach

The Emily's Hope curriculum is structured to support K-12 students, ensuring a sequential learning process that builds on key prevention principles. It features:

- 🧠 Science-Based Learning - Explores how the adolescent brain develops and how substances interfere with critical functions.
- 👥 Story-Driven Approach - Uses relatable characters and real-life scenarios to help students connect with the material and apply it to their lives.
- 🎬 Engaging Multimedia Tools - Includes animations, interactive activities, and discussion-based lessons.
- 👉 Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Integration - Reinforces emotional regulation, goal-setting, and self-advocacy skills.
- 📚 Teacher-Friendly Resources - Provides comprehensive lesson plans, hands-on activities, and professional development support.

The curriculum is designed for flexible implementation, allowing educators to adapt lessons based on classroom needs while maintaining fidelity to core learning objectives.

## Pilot Program & Key Findings

To assess its impact, the Emily's Hope Substance Use Prevention Curriculum was piloted in nine elementary schools across the Midwest, reaching approximately 380 third- and fourth-grade students in 17 classrooms. The evaluation utilized a difference-in-difference model, comparing student outcomes in pilot schools to a control group.

### KEY RESULTS

- Statistically significant improvements in student knowledge, demonstrated by 21% improvement from baseline to post-curriculum mean scores.
- Higher comprehension of substance use risks, particularly regarding brain function and fentanyl awareness.
- Increased engagement and discussions about drug safety in the classroom and at home.
- Positive counselor and teacher feedback, emphasizing the curriculum's age-appropriateness and impact on student awareness.

Counselor interviews highlighted the effectiveness of key strategies, including:

- ✔ The Pause-Think-Act (PTA) framework, teaches students to slow down and consider consequences before making decisions.
- ✔ Emotion regulation techniques, helping students understand and manage their feelings in a healthy way.
- ✔ Peer pressure resistance strategies, equipping students with verbal and social tools to say no to harmful behaviors.

## Visual Representation of Results

QUESTION	CONTROL PRE-SURVEY	CONTROL POST-SURVEY	PILOT PRE-SURVEY	PILOT POST-SURVEY
Understanding brain function	53.79%	46.21%	47.09%	<b>52.91%</b>
Identifying brain anatomy	46.36%	53.64%	37.46%	<b>62.28%</b>
Recognizing neurotransmitters	41.53%	58.47%	27.18%	<b>72.82%</b>
Interpreting "Pause-Think-Act" (PTA)	57.83%	42.17%	34.55%	<b>65.45%</b>
Medication safety awareness	52.55%	47.45%	48.09%	<b>51.91%</b>
Effects of substance use on brain function	53.08%	46.92%	41.99%	<b>58.01%</b>
Recognizing substance impact on emotions	52.33%	47.67%	48.64%	<b>51.36%</b>
Understanding long-term substance risks	49.34%	50.66%	47.94%	<b>52.06%</b>
Identifying emotional control centers	40.85%	59.15%	39.43%	<b>60.57%</b>
Awareness of fentanyl dangers	53.08%	46.92%	49.89%	<b>51.11%</b>

## Future Directions & Expansion

Following the success of the pilot program, **Emily's Hope** is expanding the curriculum to **more schools and grade levels**, with a focus on:

- Scaling the program to middle and high schools to ensure a comprehensive K-12 prevention pathway.
- Enhancing teacher training through workshops, implementation guides, and fidelity checklists.
- Developing additional materials, including animations and educator support tools.
- Conducting longitudinal research to measure the curriculum's long-term effects on student behavior and substance use rates.
- Parental Education to inform parents of the dangers of current illicit drug supply and why their children must receive this timely curriculum.
- Building partnerships with community organizations, state agencies, and national prevention networks to broaden program reach.

## Conclusion

The Emily's Hope Substance Use Prevention Curriculum is a scientifically grounded, highly engaging, and developmentally appropriate program that empowers students with the knowledge and skills to make healthy choices. By providing early, effective drug prevention education, the program is helping to reduce substance use initiation, improve decision-making, and foster a generation of informed, resilient youth.

For more information or to bring Emily's Hope Substance Use Prevention Curriculum to your school, visit [emilyshopeedu.org](http://emilyshopeedu.org).

## References

Cole Edwards, MS IV, Vivek Anand, MD. Changes in Knowledge, Attitudes, and Perceptions About Substance Use Among Third Graders After Introduction of Substance Use Prevention Curriculum: A Pilot Study. *South Dakota Medicine*. 2023 December.

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