

Huffing and Sniffing Can Snuff Out Potential

SAFE Inc. Works to Prevent Inhalant Abuse in Chesterfield County, Virginia

By Mary Lib Morgan and Sharyl Adams

Kids refer to it as huffing, sniffing or bagging. Some professionals know it as inhalant abuse, while others remain largely in the dark about this form of substance abuse that can begin in mid-to-late elementary school, reaches its peak in middle school and usually declines in high school. Favored choices of products include air duster, body deodorant sprays, correction fluid, butane and whipped cream canisters. It's not the product itself the kids are after, rather the gases or fumes from the products. These reach the brain within seconds and have the potential to cause death the first time, or any time, they are used.

SAFE Inc., a drug abuse prevention coalition in suburban Chesterfield County, a community of 318,000 residents outside of Richmond, Virginia, began to mobilize around this issue after a November 2005 survey of youth conducted randomly at eighth, tenth and twelfth grades indicated that eighth-grade youths reported a past thirty day use of inhalants at then twice the national average.

Inhalant abuse is the deliberate concentration and inhalation of fumes, vapors or gases for their drug-like effects. Onset of the "high" is rapid – within several seconds – and effects are short-lived, making experimenting with inhalants a perfect way for middle schoolers, in particular, to achieve the high they've heard older teens glorify.

The effects of inhalant use are similar to those of alcohol, such as dizziness, loss of coordination, slurred speech and reduced inhibitions. Because the fumes reach the brain unfiltered, they can cause significant damage. For example, inhalant use can destroy the myelin sheath protecting neurons in the brain and other parts of the central nervous system, resulting in symptoms similar to multiple sclerosis.

Heartbreaking stories told by family members of youth who were simply experimenting bring home the reality that, unpredictably, inhalant abuse can be deadly. Jeff Williams, a detective from East Cleveland, Ohio, shares a story about his son experimenting with air duster, which was in the house in large quantities since father and son enjoyed building and repairing computers together. Kyle, then 14, unbeknownst to protective parents, had experimented only a few times. His mother found him upright in bed, dead, with the air duster straw still in his mouth.

Inhalant abuse prevention needs to start early, with products described as containing toxic chemicals and poisons that are dangerous when not used as directed. Because of the easy accessibility of these products, adults are cautioned not to refer to them as drugs that can cause a high. Any experimentation is dangerous. However, as children approach their teen years, the discussion can carefully expand to the intentional misuse of these products.

Community approach to inhalant abuse prevention

The "aha" moment provided by the Chesterfield youth survey was a stimulus for action, a catalyst for change and an example of what can occur in a community when partners gather

around a concern, educate themselves and others and dig into the hard, but very rewarding work of comprehensive community prevention. In 2006, SAFE formed an Inhalant Abuse Task Force which rallied its stakeholders in the public school system, the police and fire departments, the health department, mental health support services and private mental health/substance abuse providers into comprehensive prevention programming. The sequence of events that followed the call to action included the key strategies of education, awareness and environmental change.

Education

SAFE's educational strategies targeted adults and demonstrated that children's behavior can be changed even when they are not the direct target of the educational initiative.

Since our community had little knowledge about inhalant abuse, SAFE began by contracting with a national expert to educate us about inhalant abuse. We expanded that training by training our key stakeholders, including health department staff, mental health prevention services and substance abuse treatment staff, child safety and school resource officers, and school counselors, social workers and psychologists.

SAFE then planned an initiative to train all staff in each of Chesterfield's 38 elementary schools and 14 middle schools. We felt it was important that all adults in the school environment be educated about inhalant abuse, so children would be surrounded by adults who were alert to possible use and aware of how to help prevent use. A manual for this training was developed and teams from our key stakeholders delivered the training to school personnel, including bus drivers, secretaries, custodians, teachers, teacher aides, school support staff and administrators.

Schools in which staff training had been completed were encouraged to offer education to parents at PTA meetings or special workshops and to highlight the issue in newsletters and other venues that reach parents.

SAFE has also provided education to treatment providers concerning best practices for intervention and treatment of inhalant abuse.

To date, SAFE and its partners have trained over 2,000 professionals, educators and other school staff about inhalant abuse.

Awareness campaign

At the same time SAFE was providing education to professionals and school staff, it was also increasing parent and community awareness about inhalants. SAFE has successfully called attention to the problem of inhalant abuse and educated many members of the Chesterfield community by holding town hall meetings and engaging in mass media efforts in March, highlighting National Inhalant and Poison Awareness Week. The local news media has provided excellent coverage on the issue, both in print and on radio and television. SAFE places paid ads in community newspapers throughout the year, educating adults about warning signs of use and linking adults to other educational resources, including a national web-based training module for parents. Television and print ads in August remind parents to purchase water-soluble, non-toxic products when choosing their children's supplies for school and home.

Environmental strategies

SAFE also worked to create safer environments for children by changing policies that would reduce or eliminate abusable products at school. SAFE was successful in working with school administrators to require student supply lists to specify non-abusable products. For example, instead of listing “dry erase markers,” school supply lists specify “low odor dry erase markers.”

SAFE also ensured that inhalant abuse is included in school policies addressing substance abuse and has helped to clarify procedures for school administrators that provide guidance for handling suspected or actual cases of inhalant abuse.

Results

The 2007 survey in Chesterfield revealed impressive changes, including a 44 percent reduction in past 30-day use among eighth graders. The work continues, as SAFE and school officials await the results of the 2009 youth survey.

Most gratifying are the stories parents, teachers, school police officers and administrators share when they recognize what would have gone unnoticed prior to SAFE’s efforts – a student breathing in the fumes from a mini-Axe body spray canister, easily hidden in the folds of a shirt or a student seemingly intoxicated from alcohol use who “straightens up” during the long walk down the hallway to the office. Now that adults are more aware of the signs and symptoms, they can engage children and teens in conversation about the dangers of inhalant use.

This is the mission of SAFE relating to preventing inhalant abuse: to make what was invisible visible by increasing adult awareness of this phenomenon and thus making the lives of children safer.