

Chapter 13

HEALTH PROMOTION FOR SCHOOL STAFF

Staff Wellness Programs

Staff Wellness Programs

School nurses and other health care personnel can play a significant role in promoting the health and wellness of all school staff. School personnel who want to encourage children and teens to live healthy lifestyles will be more successful if they model healthy behaviors. Most adults can benefit from wellness programs and health promotion efforts, and can learn along with their students. A successful wellness program establishes a school environment that reinforces healthy habits and the safe performance of work by employees.

Many school staff members may not have a primary health care provider, and may not access health care regularly. Busy schedules, children of their own, or negative childhood experiences are just a few of the reasons that teachers and other staff may stay away from the clinic or provider's office. Nurses and school health care staff can partially meet their health needs by providing wellness and disease prevention counseling, offering immunizations, and providing education about the importance of primary care visits. For those staff without health insurance, school wellness programs can provide a valuable resource that offers both needed services and positive role modeling on the part of the school nurse and other health care staff.

In an employee wellness program, staff should be provided with information and experiences that promote an understanding of wellness and a commitment to its benefits. School districts should develop their own staff wellness programs based on the needs of their particular communities, and school nurses and other health care personnel should be an integral part of this planning. School health care personnel can develop and administer surveys and/or questionnaires about the types of activities or classes that staff would enjoy, or can strategize with other community health care providers to implement programs addressing those diseases for which staff have the highest risk (based on age, gender, etc.). Wellness programs and classes can be offered during or after school hours, and can include students, parents, and other members of the community. There is no existing model for what a wellness program *should* include; the following list is only a guide for possible programs:

Consumer health

School nurses and other health care personnel can educate school staff about how to operate within the health care system as a consumer. This can mean teaching skills such

as how to be more assertive with health care providers, or instructing employees in how they can maximize the health benefits they receive from their school-based health insurance. Nurses can translate health care industry language for those who receive its services. Classes on this level can be coordinated with the human resources department of the district, and/or with representatives of the insurance agencies that provide the district's policies.

Environmental Health

Teaching school staff about the impact of the environment on their health can include workshops and/or instruction on the harmful effects of secondhand smoke, or chemical pollutants and pesticides. Staff could participate in organic gardening workshops or learn about environmentally sound cleaning products. Staff can learn by participating in an assessment of the environmental safety of the school or district, and can make recommendations for change based on their findings.

Personal Health and Fitness

The connection between physical fitness and general wellness cannot be overstated. Scientific evidence shows that loss of functional capacity, and increased illness and death attributable to chronic disease are associated with a sedentary lifestyle in adults. Additionally, studies have shown an association between higher activity levels and lower levels of body fat, increased bone mass, and lower levels of tobacco and alcohol use.¹ School health care staff can develop physical fitness programs that include noncompetitive sports, individual sports, and recreational activities, in order to expand the opportunities for everyone to participate. Guest speakers and/or fitness instructors can be invited to teach or lead classes; nurses can work with athletic coaches and staff to develop classes or exercise groups (e.g., a morning walking club) among staff. Schools can also develop relationships with community fitness centers or clubs, and consider offering memberships to their staff as part of their health benefits package, and can offer time off or other incentives for exercise, such as riding a bicycle to work.

Nutrition and Healthy Eating

Nurses can offer classes and instruction on the benefits of healthy eating and the connection between diet and the risk of disease. Cafeteria facilities can be used to teach healthy meal preparation, and guest speakers/nutritionists can be used to help staff to learn to read labels and analyze their current diets. Nurses may work with the school or district to examine the food available at the school in terms of its nutritional content and

risks or benefits. This analysis can be part of a nutrition learning experience with staff, who can then be “assigned” the responsibility of making suggestions to the school or district about changes they want to make.

Safety and Injury Prevention

Staff can be instructed about basic injury prevention and about safety specific to the school environment or their job. Those personnel who spend time in laboratories or physical facilities can be reminded about the importance of personal protective equipment and its rationale. All staff can be instructed in basic first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation, which can often be made more meaningful with guest presentations from emergency department personnel or “real life” survivors.

Prevention of Substance Use and Abuse

Staff can be taught about the physical and psychosocial toll that substance abuse can take on users and their families. Workshops that offer participants room to discuss and personally explore their own use and feelings about addictive substances can offer a safe and non-threatening environment. Nurses and other health care staff need to be ready to provide referrals to appropriate community resources for those staff that identify themselves at risk or in need of help. Smoking cessation should be a part of this program.

Mental and Emotional Health/Stress Management

Nurses and mental health care professional staff can develop regular opportunities for staff to address their mental health care needs, particularly addressing those needs that arise out of the high stress work environment of a school. Support groups, lectures, or workshops on meditation or other stress/anger management techniques can be offered after or before school hours. Staff can participate in massage or yoga classes that teach them to relax and relieve tension with exercises they can do throughout the day. They can learn about the health risks related to chronic, unrelieved stress (i.e., cardiovascular disease, ulcers).

Disease Prevention and Control

School staff can learn about communicable diseases in general, and specifically about any that have a recent history in their community. Instruction in handwashing techniques, principles of contagion, and bloodborne pathogens can be offered. This instruction will be more meaningful if the information can be related to real life risk

situations within the school environment. Annual instruction can be provided in the importance of regular immunizations against communicable and preventable diseases, with the provision of those immunizations at the discretion of the school or district. Exhibit 1 of this section provides an adult immunization schedule for reference.

Exhibit 2 provides the school nurse or health care provider with wellness goals related to all of the topics listed above, and also with extensive references that can offer further ideas for development of a program. These reference sheets come from the federal government's *Healthy People 2010* program and website, and are therefore not targeted specifically to a staff wellness program. They do, however, offer comprehensive lists of target goals for each area that the nurse can use to set her or his own wellness goals for the staff with which they work. Schools are encouraged to visit the *Healthy People 2010* website for further reading and information at: <http://www.health.gov/healthypeople>.

References

¹ American Academy of Pediatrics. (July 2001). Physical Fitness and Activity in Schools (RE9907) [Online]. Available: <http://www.AAP.org/policy/re9907.html>

