



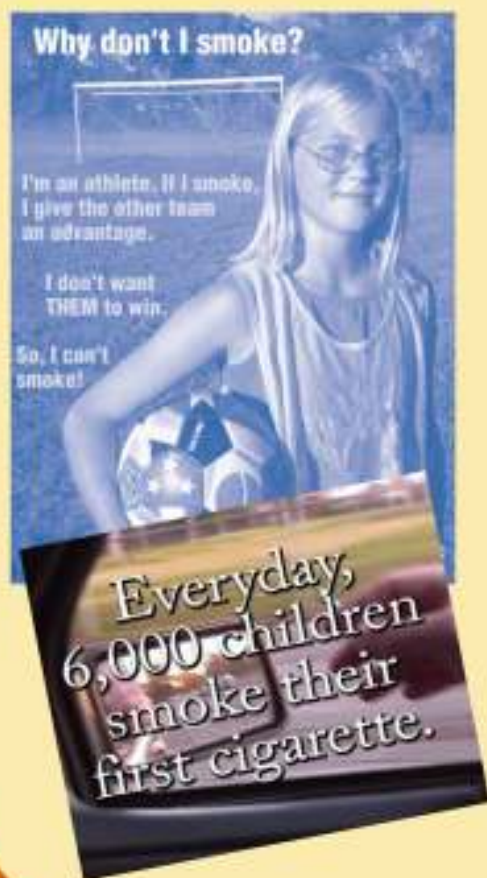
BUILDING LEADERSHIP for ACTION in SCHOOLS TODAY

The BLAST (Building Leadership for Action in Schools Today) program was started by the Lung Association in 1996 in order to reduce teen tobacco use. The Lung Association partnered with AADAC in 2001 in order to offer BLAST as part of the overall Alberta Tobacco Reduction Strategy.

Community Drug Alert recently spoke with Sara Napp, the Program Coordinator with BLAST. Sara tells us that “the goal of the BLAST program is to give participants the tools they need to educate their peers about the harmful effects of tobacco. We hope to reduce the number of teens who start to smoke - and perhaps give those who are already smoking the tools to quit. It’s all about creating awareness of what tobacco can do to you. We try to get kids from as broad a spectrum as possible involved in BLAST, youths from different ages and demographics. Many of the students who join are natural leaders who have the motivation to continue with the program, which will help all participants develop their leadership skills further.”



BLAST is offered to Alberta and Northwest Territories students in grades seven to nine. Groups of about 4-5 youth form teams with an adult coach. Students register with the BLAST program in September. In October or November, they attend a weekend BLAST conference in their area where they learn a great deal of information about tobacco and the tobacco industry. They attend seminars on tobacco related topics, leadership, project planning and team building, and create a proposal for a tobacco awareness project for their own school or community. Sara adds that "the program is geared to youths from ages 12-15. This is the age where they are first likely to be strongly pressured to use tobacco products. We hope that if their peers can work with them at this early age, they can change their perceptions and avoid tobacco altogether."



De-Normalization

The way cigarettes are featured in movies, television and advertisements, you would almost think that a majority of people are smoking. But that isn't the case at all. Only about 19% of Canadian adults still use tobacco products, and that number continues to drop. Perhaps more importantly, the number of kids between the ages of fifteen and nineteen who smoke has dropped down to only 15%. "BLAST teams really emphasize these statistics with their classmates," says Sara. "Smoking isn't a rite of passage - you don't need to smoke to fit in with your peer group. Students always try to put a positive spin on this subject and point out that while 15% of kids may smoke, 85% do not smoke!"

If there's one thing that kids hate, it's the feeling that they are being manipulated or coerced. They often resent it when adults and authority figures tell them what they should or shouldn't do. That is part of what makes the BLAST program so effective - it is peer driven and has kids talking to their friends and classmates in very honest and straightforward terms. One of the things they talk about is how the advertising and entertainment industries are strongly influenced by tobacco companies. "The tobacco industry does everything it can to make cigarettes look glamorous and attractive," says Sara. "They are trying to promote smoking as a *'normal'* activity." But there is nothing "normal" about a product that kills people when it is used precisely the way it is supposed to be used - and there is nothing glamorous about lung cancer, heart disease and smoker's cough. The BLAST program educates kids about how powerwalls and the placement of cigarette brands in movies are designed to manipulate them into using these products. They **de-normalize** the activity of smoking, and give kids the tools they need in order to resist pressure to use cigarettes and chewing tobacco.

Immediate Consequences

BLAST projects are designed by youth, and for youth, so they tend to focus on the types of consequences that kids can relate to. Sara points out that “warning kids about lung cancer and strokes might not have a big impact with them if it’s something that is not likely to happen for several decades. So most BLAST projects tend to focus on more immediate consequences.”

One of these consequences is the effect on a person’s short-term health. Lung capacity is severely compromised by smoking, and this will affect a youth’s ability to play sports. Students who are serious athletes are more likely to avoid cigarettes once they realize how badly they can impact sports performance.

Another immediate consequence associated with smoking is the cost. Some BLAST projects have focussed on the daily, weekly, monthly and yearly costs associated with smoking. Students might be encouraged to compare the costs of the following options: a month’s worth of cigarettes or a new Ipad; a year’s worth of cigarettes or a big-screen TV.



BLAST teams are able to be quite innovative and adapt their strategies to adjust to the unique circumstances in their own communities. In Whitecourt, for example, a local business owner paid for an advertisement in the town paper apologizing for tobacco shortages that inconvenienced his valued customers. The advertisement went on to say that the situation was under control and he didn’t expect any further problems in circulation. Members of the BLAST team wrote an editorial to the same paper asking just how “valued” these customers were if they were being sold a product that kills them. The fact that the business owner claims there will be no more “problems in circulation” overlooks the cancers and other diseases that are related to smoking. The editorial went on to point out that 130 Canadians die each day from tobacco-related illnesses. In two months, that adds up to the entire population of Whitecourt! Sara feels that “it’s great when BLAST teams are able to take this kind of initiative on their own and really drive home all of the costs associated with smoking.”

Powerwalls

One of the areas of concern to BLAST groups has been the powerwalls that advertise cigarette products. Sara points out that "laws in Canada are such that tobacco companies can't market their product anywhere else. These powerwalls are usually located at eye level for children, and are often located close to candy - something else you might expect kids to be attracted to."

Cigarette companies want kids to notice these powerwall ads and get hooked on tobacco so they can have a new client base for the next 40 or 50 years (or at least as long as they survive before smoking-related illness takes their life). These companies might deny that these advertisements are targeted at kids, but studies have

shown that once regular smokers turn twenty, they rarely switch tobacco brands. So what is the point of having powerwalls? The only practical reason is to entice children to start smoking that particular brand!

A number of BLAST teams attended a rally at the Alberta legislature that was trying to get powerwalls banned in the province. Sara notes that "several of the kids designed a big banner that represented a powerwall, and a bunch of them smashed through the banner at the same time to send a strong visual message showing that this kind of advertising needs to be destroyed!"

It makes perfect sense for kids to take action against powerwalls since they are the ones being targeted and victimized by this kind of advertising. It's only right that they advocate for themselves. Youths who belong to BLAST teams may be too young to vote, but they are not too young to have an impact on the political process. Sara tells us that "MLA Laurie Blakeman addressed the legislative assembly and praised the BLAST teams for their actions - and this shows politicians are paying attention to what kids have to say."



For more information on BLAST, visit their website at www.blastonline.com