The Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program is a prevention program designed to equip elementary school children with the skills they will need in resisting pressures to experiment with tobacco, alcohol, drugs and gang violence. The program is generally aimed at fifth and sixth grade students. They are at an age when they are receptive to drug prevention education, but are not yet likely to have experimented with tobacco, alcohol and drugs.

Community Drug Alert recently spoke with Sergeant John Stokker, an officer with the Edmonton Police Service, who oversees the D.A.R.E. Programs in Edmonton. He notes that “all of the D.A.R.E. Programs in our City are taught by officers with EPS. We’ve got the experience to give credibility to the message. Police officers are dealing with substance abuse first-hand - we are the ones who have to respond when there is an impaired driver or a case of spousal abuse related to drug use.”

D.A.R.E. is initially aimed at sixth grade students because they are at the gateway to junior high. They will face a lot of pressure urging them to use tobacco, alcohol and other drugs - so it’s important for them to know the consequences beforehand. The D.A.R.E. Program is offered in ten sessions that deal with a number of different topics.

There are also follow-up classes offered to students in the eighth grade that allows them to brush up the decision-making skills they learned two years earlier. These classes are also offered in ten sessions.

The goal of the Programs offered to both sixth and eighth graders is to eliminate or dramatically delay the use of tobacco, alcohol, illegal drugs and inhalants. Sgt. Stokker points out that “if we can even delay the onset of first use, there is a
DARE is not just about drugs. It is also about doing the right things. Darin our mascot reminds us of good and positive things. Darin also says that violence can hurt you and other people around you.

much better chance kids will be able to resist being addicted to a substance."

The brains of teenagers are still growing and developing. If they start smoking or drinking in their early teens, it becomes a lot harder for them to quit because those substances become a part of their development - it's almost like they become 'programmed' to carry out these activities.

The D.A.R.E. Program allows officers to adapt the material somewhat so that they are able to more effectively deal with the unique problems different communities face. For example, if a community has a serious problem with inhalants or crystal meth, the officer will devote more time and energy educating kids about the perils associated with those substances. "We also try to direct more attention to at-risk communities," says Sergeant Stokker. "Students in some areas are more likely to come from homes where alcohol and substance abuse are prevalent - so we feel that delivering D.A.R.E. Programs to those schools is a high priority. We currently have Programs running in 47 elementary schools and 4 junior high schools in Edmonton. Officers love delivering the D.A.R.E. Program because it gives them a chance to work proactively in preventing problems - rather than reacting after a crime has been committed."

Knowledge Is Power
During the 1980's there was a famous drug strategy that advised kids to "just say no to drugs!" Unfortunately, this campaign proved very ineffective. It told kids not to use drugs, but it didn't
"D.A.R.E. hasn't just taught me about drugs. It has taught me daily life skills. I've learned ways to live a better life and take care of myself."

Sixth Grader

tell them why they shouldn't be using drugs. It was almost like asking kids to bury their heads in the sand and ignore the problems around them. "Things have changed a lot since then," says Sergeant Stokker, "and perhaps the most important thing we've learned is that we have to let kids make their own choices, and we have to ensure that we are helping them make informed choices."

Kids are constantly hearing opinions about what is going on around them, but the D.A.R.E. program seeks to teach them facts. Sergeant Stokker points out that "one of the pieces of misinformation kids have to contend with revolves around the percentage of teenagers who use tobacco. A lot of kids think they have to smoke to fit in. We ask sixth grade students in the D.A.R.E. Program how many eighth grade students they think smoke cigarettes. Most assume that about 50-60 out of 100 are smoking. The truth is only about 14% of eighth graders smoke, and that number is dropping."

The same applies to alcohol use. The majority of kids in the sixth grade assume most eighth graders consume alcohol regularly, but in fact only about 20% of eighth graders will have consumed an alcoholic product in the last month.

When kids are surfing the net, they are also exposed to a lot of misinformation that might downplay or deny the side-effects of drugs. Letting them know the truth about side-effects and consequences before they are pressured into using drugs allows kids to make a much more informed decision. "We are very proud of the fact that D.A.R.E. is science-based and research-driven," says Sergeant Stokker. "We aren't just sitting back and telling kids drugs are wrong - we are providing them with effective, comprehensive and scientific information that outlines all the risks and lets them make their own choices. I'm confident that in the vast majority of cases, they are going to make the right choices."
Resisting Peer Pressure
What's the best way for kids to resist peer pressure to smoke, drink or take other drugs? By making a clear and unequivocal statement telling their friends they are not interested. The D.A.R.E. Program teaches kids the importance of both verbal and non-verbal responses. If somebody offers you a smoke or a drink and you look down at the ground while saying ‘Um, uhhh - I don't think so,’ that isn’t sending a clear message. D.A.R.E. advises kids to:

1) Establish eye contact: people take you more seriously when you look them right in the eye. They know you mean what you say, and they don’t feel that you are intimidated.
2) Use A Firm Voice: If you are speaking in a clear voice, and don’t have a lot of “uhms” and pauses, this sends a much stronger statement.
3) Use “I” Messages: Don’t tell others that what they are doing is wrong, just tell them “I don’t want to.”
4) Offer a Reason: If you can back up your statement with a reason, it carries a little more weight with others.

Of course, there’s a world of difference between a classroom setting and the real world kids encounter when they leave school. To better prepare themselves for real life situations, kids in the D.A.R.E. Program are encouraged to role-play scenes over and over again so the responses come naturally. It’s like anything else in life - practice makes perfect.

Techniques and strategies that work for one teenager might not be effective for everybody. “We encourage kids to develop their own responses, ones that are responsible.

Tennis star Serena Williams (with her sister Venus) is a D.A.R.E. Program graduate.
"D.A.R.E. is a unique and magical program that gives law enforcement officials the opportunity to provide kids with the knowledge and strength to make choices they can call their own."

D.A.R.E. Officer

respectful and realistic," says Sgt. Stokker. "For example, imagine somebody comes up to you at a party and offers you a cigarette. If you take the cigarette, drop it on the ground, and grind it under your foot, that certainly wouldn’t be a very respectful response."

The techniques that help kids to resist peer pressure can be used to help them deal with the advertising that tries to convince them to use a particular product. 45,000 Canadian smokers die every year as a direct result of tobacco use, and the tobacco industry is doing everything it can to recruit new victims. Magazine advertising and power-wall displays for tobacco products are often targeted directly at kids. The same goes for beer commercials. The actors in these commercials are always good-looking, and usually in their early 20's - only a few years older than the teenagers that so many of the commercials are aimed at. “We get kids thinking critically about the advertising they are exposed to,” says Sergeant Stokker. “A lot of commercials try to lure kids in by showing a glamorous picture of a product without showing any of the risks. When kids are able to sit back and really analyze this kind of advertising, they understand how companies are trying to manipulate them, and they aren’t as likely to be swayed by these messages.”