

Christin D'Ovidio:

Welcome to The Power of Prevention podcast. In each podcast, we will go deeper into the topic of prevention in New Hampshire. We'll share our best interviews with you, of people who are working tirelessly for their professions, their families, and their communities to stop something unwanted from happening, in this case, substance misuse. This is a podcast for people who are looking for solutions and want to make New Hampshire a better place, where we all have the opportunity to live, learn, and thrive.

Christin D'Ovidio:

We are hoping to make your lives a little better with these inspirational stories about substance misuse prevention. Welcome to The Power of Prevention podcast series. I'm your host Christin D'Ovidio. We're joined by Kim Haley, the student assistant program coordinator for Second Start in Concord. Second Start provide Student Assistant Program or SAP services for seven schools within the capital region. Second Start also has a contract with the New Hampshire Bureau of Drug and Alcohol services to provide guidance and support to SAP coordinators across New Hampshire.

Christin D'Ovidio:

We're going to talk today about what helps students positively cope with their feelings and regulate their emotions, giving kids the essentials so that they might make better functions in and out of school and be able to learn. So let's get right into it. Prevention will definitely come into play when we head back to school this fall. As we're still very much in the grips of COVID-19 some really struggled to engage in school and in turn may engage in risky behavior. So I wanted to find out what issues Kim sees from the perspective of a counselor in the school environment.

Kimberly Haley:

I think parents were very stressed out. They were balancing between their dedication to their work and having to help their kid. And if their kid was struggling, it really tore their heart strings and they felt pretty helpless. We saw some of that when parents were going to school board meetings, asking schools to reopen, what schools were trying to go by CDC guidelines, as far as opening or not. It's hard to watch your kids struggle. And even when schools came back in the spring, the teachers did a bang up job. They were caught between having to teach to remote students and live students at the same time. It was like having two jobs and teachers and administrators want students to be successful. Their job is to educate them. And when you can't reach a child that's really struggling it's really hard. So I think near the end, the focus became less on academic success. They were more concerned with students' mental health.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Along with that, I did focus on mental health, came the importance of the SAP or student assistance program, which became essential to support students and their families in aid and intervention. Here's Kim.

Kimberly Haley:

SAP as a whole fits very well into the multi-tiered systems of support because tier one deals with an entire population, regardless of [inaudible 00:03:34]. So that would involve the entire school population. And SAP counselors provide classroom discussions and education on alcohol and drug prevention, and they provide mental health resources and identifying what makes a person really overwhelmed, what's the point where they need to reach out for help. SAPs also provide alcohol and drug and mental health messaging throughout the school for students and for staff, they provide staff training. They also provide information to parents, open houses, step up nights, sending emails to parents, posting things on the website for resources that the parents can access to help them, say, have a conversation with their kids about the use of alcohol or other drugs. Tier two involves students who have one or more risk factors having to do with their potential to use alcohol and other drugs.

Kimberly Haley:

Some of these examples might be poor attachment to school, having unresolved mental health issues, having poor peer relations, having trouble making friends. And basically what happens is students can get involved with SAP and the SAP counselor can help. Tier three is for the most at-risk youth. These are kids that would have trouble engaging in school overall, or other responsibilities at home because their mental health issues are such that they're not able to function. So those are students that would be referred out to more intensive services in the community, whether that's like drug and alcohol treatment or mental health treatment and SAP counselors are available to help.

Christin D'Ovidio:

According to Kim this program works in tandem with traditional guidance counselors and is most often offered to grades 6 through 12. It could be a great way to coordinate parent presentations, newsletters, and information. But I wanted to know how these at-risk students are identified in the first place.

Kimberly Haley:

Some of the things that people might want to at, in regards to identifying a kid at-risk is emotionally withdrawn, difficulty with their peer relationships, poor engagement with school,

unpreparedness, they can't organize themselves, absenteeism, complaints of frequent illnesses, poor [inaudible 00:06:18], they look drawn, poor hygiene, they're not taking care of themselves, defiance and lots of anger, emotional dysregulation. They're unable to maintain an even keel. Poor boundaries, they're letting people into their life, they take advantage of them. Unhealthy relationships, they're allowing people in their life that might be abusive or might not be a good friend and they continue to have the relationship with these people. And they might be talking about problems at home. How much stress a family might be under for a variety of reasons. It could be a parent loses a job. It could be a child worried about a parent's depression. It could be a child that's worried about their grandmother that lives in the house that drinks too much alcohol.

Kimberly Haley:

It could be a variety of different issues. So the student might vocalize offhandedly and a teacher might pick up on that comment and go, "Wow, how can we support this kid?" And that teacher might refer that student. It's important to catch things, obviously as early as possible to help the student get back on track, because it's very difficult to learn when you're struggling with trauma, you're struggling with your own mental health issues. You feel alone, unheard. It's very hard to do after receiving a referral. SAP coordinators will call a student down and introduce themselves and tell them about the services that are available to them.

Kimberly Haley:

They'll discuss the contents of the referral. They'll talk about the student's rights of confidentiality. We also let them know that this program is voluntary. It's open to all students in the school, but nobody's obligated to participate. And SAP's usually send a letter out in the beginning of the year, letting parents know that these services exist and they can access them at any time and how they can contact the SAP coordinator if they have concerns.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Now that we can identify who is at risk, I wanted to find out how SAP provides students with coping skills when they are emotionally dysregulated.

Kimberly Haley:

So SAPs have a of different things that they'll do with students to help them regroup. One of those things is to validate their feelings. Everybody wants to feel validated. So I can see that you're overwhelmed. It's really hard to attend your responsibilities when you're feeling this way. We also work with students to help them make connections between situations and their emotions so they can better understand it, that these kinds of situations are things that might trigger their trauma, so they can expect that. So next time it happens, they'll recognize, "Oh, this

is related to this. It's not something that's going to overwhelm me, kill me, or make me not be able to live my life." The faster they're able to identify and create an intervention for it the more they're able to regroup and focus again. We also help kids with breathing exercises. They can come in the office and manipulate objects with their hands that distracts them.

Kimberly Haley:

There's grounding techniques. An example would be a student, could be in the office and you could ask them, "Name me five things you can see. What can you smell?" Those kinds of things. Get them back into the moment. We also have like art supplies in the office where students can come down and just mellow out and distract themselves from what's going on. And once the student is settled, then we take them and we send them back to class so they can learn because now they're focused and they're calmed down and then they can engage in class and they're not distracting anybody and they can learn and get their work. So it's a win-win.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Once they've regrouped, they work with the students to strengthen their self-worth and their relationships to peers and adults.

Kimberly Haley:

They decide what they would like to work on, what they're ready to make a change with. And that can vary student to student. It could be talking about what a healthy relationship is because they've never known one. So they have it kind of as a guide with their interactions with other people, what are you willing to put up with and what are you willing not to put up with. They might come in and say, "I want to cut down on my marijuana use," or, "I want to stop vaping."

Kimberly Haley:

So we'll work with them on taking steps to help them do that. We never tell them what to do. And I think in talking about things that they struggle with, they learn a lot about themselves because we not only talk about the problems they're experiencing, but the strengths that they have. And we help students build on those strengths and to increase the amount of connections they have with other people that can serve as advocates for them.

Kimberly Haley:

Because the more advocates we have around us cheering us on, the more successful we're going to become and the less attractive, risky behaviors are. We have the support we need, why would I want to do that when I have this? This is so great and this makes me feel good over the long term. And it's not an easy thing to do to make changes. It takes time. And students who

participate in group services, they'll participate with other students who have similar concerns to theirs. So other people who know how they feel. Right there, it reduces somebody's isolation. "I'm not the only one. I'm not alone in this."

Kimberly Haley:

They also gather a bunch of ideas that other students are using to get through life. And they'll try on some of those solutions to see if they work for them. So it's kind of like a team effort that everybody works together. And when students learn how to put their problems in compartments, they have times where they can work on things and then, "I have to put this stuff away in order to take care of my responsibilities." And once they're able to learn how to do that, then you have learners, then you have kids that are capable of learning

Christin D'Ovidio:

SAP groups meet during the school day on a rotating basis. It's a great way to work on certain skills with other kids that are struggling with the same issues. Given the benefit of this togetherness, I wanted to know how they were able to maintain this during COVID and still be socially distant.

Kimberly Haley:

It was a struggle and part of that was the fact that not all families award students a right to privacy, to participate in groups. And some students didn't feel uncomfortable with other people in their household hearing about their personal struggle. But groups still went on. It was hard not being able to hug people. So it's much more powerful in person because you can feel the energy in the room. When you do a Zoom, it's hard to feel the energy and students are more engaged in person. But they still had the ability to email the SAP counselor and talk about something that was bothering them if they didn't feel comfortable with the Zoom. And then the SAP counselor could write back to them about, "This is something you could try. Look up this resource to provide ongoing support." There were some SAP counselors that met students at a park with parental permission.

Christin D'Ovidio:

So speaking of family, how do SAP support families beyond the student?

Kimberly Haley:

Well, schools want to support kids and their family. A stronger family makes it more likely that a child's going to be successful. If the family has a basic needs met, then the kid will do better. It's not rocket science. They'll just do better. So parents have the opportunity to contact the school

whenever they have a concern and talk to an SAP counselor about their kid. "I'd like you to check in with my student because this and this is going on and I have concerns about their mental health." And then the SAP counselor could say, "Well, I can offer a screening. I could kind of weed out what are some of the obstacles that are getting in your child's way and come help the child come up with a plan about how we can resolve some of these."

Kimberly Haley:

School counselors are also a great resource to contact, to talk to them particularly if a student is struggling academically and the family's worried about their progress in school. Well, if you support the parents, then the kid is better off. And the parents are always taken back. It's a great gift to be able to help lift somebody up and make them feel like they count and that somebody's there and feels for you and wants to help you.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Knowledge is power and SAP also arms parents with information on what to look for in terms of substance trends, navigating mental health warning signs, and more.

Kimberly Haley:

You're not in this alone. It takes a community to support people. So we're all in this together. Don't be afraid to reach out. It's not like your problem, it's our problem. There's no shame in asking for help. Everybody needs help. Everyone. I can't tell you also, the number of times that SAP counselors might get phone calls, adolescence is a very difficult time for kids and parents alike. And it's a very emotional time for students because they rely on the emotional side of their brain because their frontal lobes aren't fully developed. So they don't have the judgment that adults do. So adolescents spill a lot. And sometimes they're irrational.

Christin D'Ovidio:

When it comes to a crisis situation, Kim says, "It's that sense of community that helps make the decisions."

Kimberly Haley:

In times of crisis, parents have an opportunity to contact when SAP coordinator at a school and say, "Look, I'm really struggling with my kid and I need to talk to somebody about what I could possibly do." The first thing an SAP coordinator would do is, because you never make these decisions alone, it's always a team, you would get the child's guidance counselor, school psychologist, and you would interview the child again, because you want to figure out whether their plan is solid, like how serious this is and come up with inappropriate response and two or

three heads is better than one to make sure that you're making the right decision. And if we deem this as a serious situation, obviously we're going to notify a parent. That's the first phone call that gets made. And then we talk to the parent about getting the child evaluated to find out whether they might need to be hospitalized or not so they could come up with some kind of safety plan to keep the child safe.

Christin D'Ovidio:

The key to success with any of this is prevention and early intervention. So how can we get ahead of it all? Here's Kim.

Kimberly Haley:

First of all, this can start as early as child comes out of the womb. Parents provide the best platform for kids to learn how to identify and express their feelings, to be free to just say, "This is where I'm at today." And little kids can say, "I'm really sad," and allowing your child to talk about, "What makes you sad about that?" Because kids, as they get older, who are able to identify their feelings, they learn how to better cope with their emotions so they can attend to their responsibilities to life. I've often heard it said that, "This kid is just looking for attention. They're just dramatic." And maybe so, but you don't know for sure, because the bottom line is that we all want to be heard. We all want to be validated. We all want to be seen, every human being. Human beings crave connection and understanding, and kids need that from their parents.

Kimberly Haley:

They need parents that will hear them out and take the time to let them express themselves and to intervene if the child is so emotional that they can't function, then they need to talk to somebody outside the family. On top of that, parents serve as the number one deterrent as far as alcohol and drug prevention goes. Kids by and far are less likely to use alcohol and drugs if parents specifically lay out their expectations about the use of alcohol and drugs on the part of young kids whose parents say, "I don't want you using this and this is why," and they have rules about, those kids are less likely to partake in alcohol and drug use simply because their parents have conversations with them about it. But some parents might be like, "My parents didn't talk to me about this. I don't know how to talk to my kid about issues related to substance use."

Christin D'Ovidio:

Oftentimes kids aren't struggling in a vacuum. Parents are also struggling with their own substance use or mental health issues. So I wanted to know from Kim what tips she had for parents dealing with these situations.

Kimberly Haley:

I think sometimes parents who are in recovery will talk to the kids about the fact that, "I struggled with these issues and it's in your genetics and you have a higher predisposition to develop this illness." I think it's great to be open with kids about that. And I want parents out there to know who might struggle with alcohol and drug use, who were using now this behavior of developing a substance use disorder, doesn't say anything about their character. You can be a wonderful, wonderful human being and develop an [inaudible 00:23:32] and contacting the SAP council at your child's school is not going to get you judged. They want to help you. They want to help you to access resources, because if you're taking care of things that you struggle with, your child's more likely to decide, "I'm going to take care of some of the things that I struggle with too."

Christin D'Ovidio:

According to Kim, SAP counselors have a great relationship with providers in the community and they refer parents to mental health services, but there is a shortage of providers in the state of New Hampshire. So Kim is urging parents to go to their legislators about increasing infrastructure for mental health services. Given the demands and the reality of getting back to school, I wanted to know what Kim's thoughts were in terms of COVID and what we can expect this fall.

Kimberly Haley:

I think that people need to be prepared to understand that the losses felt during the pandemic are going to continue. Some families actually lost family members to COVID and they weren't able to say goodbye. They weren't able to go to the nursing home or in the hospital to say goodbye. And some of these students who have had losses are going to be coming into school, and they're going to periodically be having little hiccups of grief that are going to come up. And sometimes it's going to feel overwhelming. So people should expect that. And parents could actually contact the school to find out whether they have any grief groups that they have going on to support students. The amount of isolation that some people felt was great. And that's going to have a lasting impact. For adolescents, one of their jobs is to master social skills. And when you're isolated from people and not being able to practice that skill, it becomes more difficult to know how to ask for help.

Kimberly Haley:

So students are going to need more encouragement, "Do you need help?" And prompts, so they'll stand up and let people know when they're overwhelmed, that it's okay to ask for help. And they have to understand that some of the peer groups might've shifted during the pandemic. So peers

that were really close might not be as close or might even be closer. Students are going to need support with that because they might have some angst over the fact that, "This friend doesn't seem to want to hang out with me anymore. I don't understand." So they're going to need to vocalize some of those feelings. So adults can really be supportive the kids in that regard. These are a huge uptick in anxiety, depression, inability to control their emotions because all their feelings were repressed for so long. So adults need to be aware of this. That kids are going to be struggling with this, they're going to need some support. Let's prevent it.

Christin D'Ovidio:

One last question, I think. What is your definition of prevention?

Kimberly Haley:

Many people might think prevention, they're just thinking about somebody who uses substances or about to use substances and prevention is something very different than what people perceive it to be. Number one, prevention is very fluid. It's not like one event, one situation. It's something that happens over the course of our life. And prevention is basically to me, the acquisition of information, skills and connections that help us face the challenges of life and for kids who are just learning these types of skills it takes a while to master them. Things like self-advocacy, how to stand up and get what you need. Number one, it takes a lot of ego strength to do something like that. And some people who never learned it later in life are learning. But new challenges come up every day. So prevention is something that helps us handle things. So we don't have to engage in risky behaviors to get rid of feelings that are harmful to us.

Christin D'Ovidio:

That's a great definition.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Thanks to services like SAP, we thankfully have some more support.