



Prevention Program

**A Peer Group Approach  
to Building  
Personal Competencies and  
Social Resources for  
Vulnerable Youth**

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# Reconnecting Youth

An indicated prevention program for reducing school dropout, drug involvement, violence, depression & suicide-risk behaviors.



## BACKGROUND

Adolescent drug involvement, anger/aggression, depression and suicidal behaviors are major co-occurring health problems, particularly among high-risk youth, such as potential high school dropouts. A health promotion and prevention challenge is early identification of these youth and implementation of targeted, multi-faceted prevention programs to reduce co-occurring health-risk behaviors.

Youth who experience co-occurring health risk behaviors, including mood issues and drug involvement are in need of *indicated* preventive interventions. Research shows that behavioral interventions are promising. Effective programs:

- Select for individuals at high-risk for problem behaviors, and
- Incorporate cognitive-behavioral interventions for building problem-solving skills.

Reconnecting Youth is such a program.

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Reconnecting Youth (RY) is a 'science-based' group approach to increasing school achievement, and decreasing anger/aggression problems, depression, suicidal behaviors and drug involvement. It is an indicated prevention program targeting youth in middle and high school who are at high risk for school dropout.

The RY program begins with an individual invitation to join. It is a semester-long class offered as part of the regular school curriculum, taken for credit and a grade. RY is taught by a specially-selected and trained adult (e.g., teacher, counselor, school nurse) who excels at working with high-risk youth.

RY is taught in a small-group context with a teacher-to-student ratio of 1:10-12. Students set personal goals and support classmates towards their goals related to increasing School Achievement and Drug Use Control, and decreasing Suicide Risk Behaviors.

## RY Program Goals

- ☑ **Increased SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT**
  - Increased school bonding
  - Increased attendance, GPA, credits earned
- ☑ **Decreased DRUG INVOLVEMENT**
  - Increased drug use control
  - Decreased adverse drug-use consequences
- ☑ **Decreased SUICIDE RISK**
  - Decreased suicidal behaviors
  - Decreased related risk factors (depression, hopelessness, anger-control problems, stress)
  - Increase protective factors (self-esteem, personal control, and social support from peers, family and school)

The program incorporates group support and life skills training with the following components:

- The semester-long RY class
- Social activities and school bonding
- School system crisis response plan
- Parent involvement

## RY Group Structure

- ☑ **10-12 students/group; all at dropout risk**
- ☑ **Richly diverse group (grade levels, gender, risk factors, disconnectedness, strengths)**
- ☑ **Implemented daily in the students' school**
- ☑ **55-minute periods over a semester (also fits with block scheduling over a trimester)**
- ☑ **Combines a tested peer group approach with a tested life skills training approach**

The RY prevention model is presented in a curriculum that includes five distinct units.

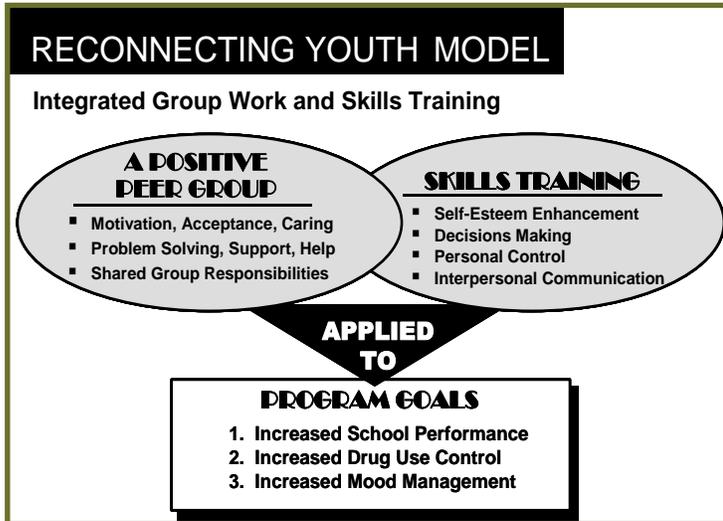
- Getting Started
- Self-esteem enhancement
- Decision Making
- Personal Control
- Interpersonal Communication

Student Risk Factors	Corresponding RY Prevention Strategies
<p><b>School System Risk Factors</b>—norms of skipping, drug use at school, negative views of school, non-participation in school activities, poor teacher-student relationships, low access to help.</p>	<p><b>School System Strategies</b>—set norms for increasing school achievement &amp; decreasing drug use at school, establish school network support system, provide positive school bonding activities.</p>
<p><b>Individual Risk Factors</b>—impulsiveness, poor decision-making/coping skills, low self-worth, poor social and interpersonal skills.</p>	<p><b>Individual Approaches</b>—provide skills training in self-esteem, decision making, personal control, and interpersonal communication, teach self-monitoring, encourage and support healthy activities.</p>
<p><b>Peer Group Risk Factors</b>—peers skip school/use drugs, peers lack goals related to school, susceptible to negative peer influences.</p>	<p><b>Peer Group Strategies</b>—set norms for all to commit to the RY program goals, develop a positive peer group in which members support and encourage each other, develop group belonging in RY.</p>
<p><b>Family Risk Factors</b>—family distress or conflicts, poor family-school connections, inconsistent rules, unconventional drug-use norms.</p>	<p><b>Family Approaches</b>—obtain active parental consent, obtain parental support for RY program goals, enhance parent/teacher communication, send home positive messages about the RY student.</p>

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION (cont'd)

The program is grounded in a partnership model among students, school personnel, parents and prevention specialists. RY Leader support is critical to the success of the program. Skills training is taught in the context of carefully nurtured peer group support.

RY utilizes the following prevention strategies—adult motivation and support, peer group support, coaching and skills training, monitoring and social activities and school bonding. These strategies serve to increase personal competencies and increase social support resources, leading to the desired outcomes (increased school achievement, decreased drug involvement, decreased suicide risk behaviors).



## EVALUATION DESIGN

The Reconnecting Youth program was developed, implemented and evaluated in collaboration with Pacific Northwest high schools over the course of 15 years. Three separate studies of RY (funded by NIDA and the US DOE through the University of Washington) illustrated the benefits of the program.

Over 3000 high risk youth participated in the prevention research:

- 52% female
- Ranging in age from 15-19
- From grade levels 9-12
- Diverse ethnic representation (55% minority)
- 90% retention rate across all conditions

## PROGRAM DEVELOPERS

Over the past two decades, prevention scientists at the University of Washington *Reconnecting Youth Prevention Research Program*, under the direction of Dr. Eggert, designed and tested numerous programs to help high-risk youth decrease drug use and suicidal behaviors, and increase school performance.

*Reconnecting Youth: A Peer Group Approach to Building Life Skills* was designed by Dr. Leona Eggert and Ms. Liela Nicholas. The developers and scientists at the UW consult on training for program implementation as well as research design and program evaluation.

RY Inc. offers training on site, on demand, nationally and internationally, in the implementation of its prevention programs.

## OUTCOMES

Youth participating in the RY Program evidenced the following:

**Reduced SUICIDAL BEHAVIORS, EMOTIONAL DISTRESS**

- 80% decrease in suicidal behaviors
- 75% decrease in depression & hopelessness
- 38% decrease in perceived stress
- 48% decrease in anger-control problems

**Increased SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT**

- 18% increase in GPA for all classes, excluding RY
- 7.5% increase in credits earned per semester
- Curbed increasing trend in absences
- 35% decrease in dropout rates

**Reduced DRUG INVOLVEMENT**

- 50% decrease in hard drug use
- 48% decrease in drug-use control problems
- 48% decrease in adverse drug-use consequences
- Curbed progression of alcohol and other drug use
- 7% decrease in drug involvement

**Increased PERSONAL AND SOCIAL SUPPORT ASSETS**

- 23% increase in personal control
- 25% increase in self-esteem
- 13% increase in school bonding
- 26% increase in social support

**Conclusions:** The feasibility and efficacy of school-based prevention were demonstrated. These findings support the RY theoretical model. The findings further suggest that the program works because of the RY Leader and peer group support and skills training. In fact, the greater the amount of social support and skills training, the greater the achievement of program goals.



**For training and general information:**

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## In Summary . . .

**Reconnecting Youth—what is it?** Reconnecting Youth is a science-based indicated prevention program. RY uses a school-based approach that can be easily integrated into a typical school setting as a class for a grade and credit.

**What are the goals?** The goal of RY is to help youth build coping skills and competencies, increase time spent in healthy activities, and enhance social support resources. The intended outcomes are increased school achievement (i.e., grades, credits earned, attendance), increased drug use control (i.e., decreased drug use, control problems, adverse consequences), and decreased suicide risk behaviors (i.e., decreased depression, anger/aggression).

## Pay-offs . . .

- ◆ Increased GPA
- ◆ Increased anger management
- ◆ Decreased hard drug use
- ◆ Increased personal control
- ◆ Enhanced stress management
- ◆ Stronger self confidence
- ◆ More positive connections with adults & peers

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