Evidence-based approaches to universal screening and early intervention are essential to prevent the onset of substance use during adolescence. Such approaches may prevent behavioral, physical, and developmental dangers of early use and can reduce the likelihood of substance use challenges later in life. Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) is one such approach shown to be effective in reducing and preventing problem substance use with adults. Youth-specific adaptations of SBIRT are a current focus of intervention development and research. Project Amp is one innovative SBIRT adaptation for adolescents who have low to moderate risk of problem substance use. Building on the valuable role of peer support in reducing substance use and promoting wellness, the Project Amp intervention is delivered by young adult peers with lived experience of substance use recovery. Early research findings indicate that young adult peers – also known as Project Amp mentors – add capacity to overstretched service systems and foster developmentally appropriate conversations about substance use and related risk and protective factors. Please see other Issue Briefs on implementing the intervention and pilot study outcomes to learn more about Project Amp.

Peer Roles and Training

Varying by setting and disciplines, peer roles in health and behavioral health care are often referred to as peer specialists, peer support workers, recovery coaches, or recovery support specialists – in this brief, we use the broad term “peers.” Peers can complete various training and certification programs which provide essential knowledge and skills and offer valuable credentials to secure employment. Employers can seek insurance reimbursement for billable peer services.
**What is Peer Support?**

Peer support is a powerful resource to engage and assist individuals and families at critical points of care. Specific to substance use, peer-based recovery support services are defined as “the process of giving and receiving nonprofessional, nonclinical assistance to achieve long-term recovery from substance use disorders.” Peers can incorporate their lived experience to inform their work with individuals and families. They have the skills and capacity to conduct outreach and follow-up and provide flexible supports to help people successfully engage in their own care.

**Valued Roles for Young Adult Peers**

Young adults with lived experience often fill peer recovery support roles, but their work may not be oriented specifically toward a youth population. Further, peer support typically occurs in a recovery support context. However, young adult peers have great potential to serve a valuable “upstream” role by supporting prevention and early intervention activities with adolescents. Building upon peer support skills gained from training and their own recovery experiences, young adult peers can quickly build rapport and talk with youth about concerns, risky behaviors, strengths, and goals for avoiding and reducing substance use. Initial research on Project Amp demonstrated the value of young adult peers in two ways:

1. **CAPACITY:** Across six pilot sites, the Project Amp research team recruited and trained 33 mentors, 20 of whom were eventually paired with adolescents to deliver the brief intervention. At a minimum, Project Amp mentors represented a new brief intervention referral resource for low- to moderate-risk adolescents – something that is typically lacking for settings that use SBIRT. Most adolescents screened through SBIRT will not require formal treatment – however, many would benefit from additional prevention and early intervention supports to reduce risk factors and promote wellness. In two of the six pilot sites, young adult peers played an expanded role, delivering the initial screening rather than just serving as a brief intervention resource. These innovations point to the need for additional screening capacity and the skills and untapped potential of a young peer workforce. Recruiting young adult peers in screening, intervention, and support roles can enhance access to SBIRT for young people.

2. **DEVELOPMENTAL APPROPRIATENESS:** Project Amp mentors demonstrated skills in quickly engaging youth participants, establishing rapport, and fostering open dialogue. Equipped with basic training in peer support concepts such as motivational interviewing, trauma-informed care, recovery and prevention messaging, and cultural competence, mentors supported youth to share and explore their strengths, interests, and concerns related to personal goals, substance use and related risks, and various protective factors.

"What caught my attention was meeting the mentors – that’s when I had buy-in. It helped a specific category of kids who didn’t qualify for mental health services…or who needed supplemental support – great to have someone closer to [their] age than I am and in a peer relationship.”

—Site Staff

“Cutting down on smoking [and] using healthy coping mechanisms. Those are the main things. Right afterwards I felt like really confident... for the longest time I really doubted myself, and then she was like “what you’re thinking is not stupid” and made me feel good about my plans for myself.”

—Youth
Project Amp Mentors: How it Works

Through four sessions, each lasting approximately one hour, Project Amp mentors explore the following themes together with youth participants. Each session is semi-structured with suggested activities, topics, and conversation starters. Mentors are trained in how to use the curriculum flexibly in a way that aligns with areas of interest and concern and preferred style of engagement for each youth.

- **Explore strengths, interests, and personal goals:** Early in the Project Amp relationship, these activities help mentors to get to know youth participants and set the stage for identifying personal strengths and protective factors that can be revisited throughout the intervention period.

- **Enhance self-efficacy to achieve goals:** Throughout the four sessions, mentors and youth participants track progress on youth-identified goals and explore strategies for setting, adjusting, and achieving goals.

- **Emphasize wellness and resiliency:** Mentors introduce the concept of wellness and help youth explore strategies for promoting wellness including understanding stress, using healthy coping mechanisms, resisting social pressures, cultivating social supports, and understanding factual information about alcohol and other drugs.

- **Engage with community resources and positive social networks:** Mentors explore youth interest in trying out new school or community resources relevant to their goals and support them in getting connected.

Research and best practices for adolescent SBIRT are evolving quickly. The Project Amp pilot study represents the innovations, adaptations, and iterative learning occurring across various youth-serving settings. While the results from this study are preliminary, Project Amp could help to expand access to substance use prevention and early intervention supports for youth. Further research is needed to yield insights about effectiveness as well as implementation best practices.

For more information about Project Amp, including implementation resources, visit www.projectamp4youth.com.

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