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Week 6: Behavioral Health: Physiology, Choices, & Community Impact

Module 4: A Middle School Guide to Choices: Alcohol and Drug Prevention Skills

Lesson: How Does Your Brain Help You Make Safe Choices?

Lesson Overview

Students learn how different parts of the brain influence decision-making and how alcohol and other drugs affect the brain over time. They use evidence from the module to evaluate prevention strategies and apply brain science to make informed, safe decisions in new situations.

Learning Targets

Explain how the brain affects decision-making.

Compare prevention strategies and choose the most effective one.

Use brain science to make and justify safe decisions.

Vocabulary

Prefrontal Cortex
the part of the brain that plans, makes decisions, and helps control emotions

Limbic System
the part of the brain that reacts quickly and seeks rewards

Dopamine
a chemical that creates “feel-good” reward signals

Refusal Skills
ways to say no to unsafe choices

Materials

Module
Brain visual
Student response sheets
Whiteboard or chart paper

Instructional Notes

This lesson builds on students’ previous learning about healthy choices, self-esteem, and relationships. In the module, students explore how the brain influences decision-making and how prevention strategies can help people make safer choices when faced with pressure or risky situations. The central idea is that two brain systems influence behavior in different ways. The limbic system seeks rewards and reacts quickly, while the prefrontal cortex supports planning, decision-making, and self-control. Students use evidence from the module to understand how substances can overstimulate dopamine and increase the risk of repeated use over time. Many students may believe that decisions are based only on willpower or that one-time substance use carries little risk. Through discussion and evidence gathering, students discover how brain development, dopamine, and decision-making are connected.

Learning Experience		
8 min	Opening	The teacher displays the scenario: "A friend offers you a vape. Other people are trying it and encouraging you to join." Students independently choose a response and explain their reasoning. The teacher facilitates a brief partner discussion and then invites several students to share ideas with the class. Students choose one response: try it, say no, ignore it, or walk away. They write, "I would _____ because _____." Students discuss their reasoning with a partner and revise or add to their thinking after the discussion. The teacher presents the prompt: Which choice protects your brain long-term? Sentence Frame: "This choice protects my brain because _____."
15 min	Module	**Focus**: Students gather evidence about how the brain influences decisions, how substances affect the brain, and how prevention strategies support healthy choices. **Guiding Questions**: • What parts of the brain affect decisions? • How do substances affect the brain over time? • When should different prevention strategies be used? **Quick Checks**: • "The prefrontal cortex helps me _____." • "Too much dopamine can _____." • "Addiction develops when _____ happens over time." • "_____ is used before/during because _____." Sentence Frame: "Evidence from the module shows that _____."
15 min	Application	The teacher displays the following situation: A community youth center is planning a large teen celebration after final exams. Student leaders want the event to be fun, safe, and free from alcohol, vaping, and other drugs. They are asking for advice on how to help students make healthy decisions if they experience pressure before or during the event. The teacher reminds students that all recommendations must be supported with evidence from the module. In Step 1: Identify Possible Risks, students identify situations that could create pressure or increase the likelihood of risky choices. They use evidence from the module about decision-making, dopamine, addiction, relationships, and peer influence. In Step 2: Build a Prevention Plan, students select two prevention strategies from the module. They determine whether each strategy is most useful before or during a risky situation and explain why each strategy could help students stay safe. Evidence students may use from the module includes: the prefrontal cortex helps with planning and decision-making; the limbic system seeks rewards and responds to emotions; drugs can cause the brain to release too much dopamine; too much dopamine can shift the brain's focus toward seeking the feeling again; addiction develops when substance use continues over time despite harmful

		consequences; forecasting involves thinking about possible future risks and outcomes; avoidance means staying away from risky situations; refusal means clearly choosing not to participate in a risky behavior; exit means leaving a situation that becomes unsafe or uncomfortable; and healthy relationships respect boundaries and allow people to say no. In Step 3: Evaluate the Strategies, students compare the two selected strategies, determine which strategy would likely have the greatest impact in this situation, and support the decision with evidence from the module. In Step 4: Present and Defend the Recommendation, students construct a recommendation for the youth center and explain how the recommendation helps students use their prefrontal cortex, manage pressure, and protect their long-term health. Sentence Frames: “One important risk is _____.” “Evidence from the module shows that _____.” “_____ is most effective because _____.” “Our recommendation is _____ because _____.”
2 min	Reflection	How can understanding the brain help people make safer decisions in situations involving alcohol or other drugs?
2 min	Career Connections	People who work in public health, counseling, education, healthcare, and prevention programs use many of the same skills practiced in this lesson. They evaluate risks, study how behavior is influenced, and help individuals make informed decisions that protect long-term health. Understanding how the brain works can help people make safer choices in school, social situations, and throughout their lives.