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# Be a Piece of the Puzzle: The Common Sense of Prevention

By DeAnna Pearl



Have you heard this before? "Why don't people use the common sense God gave them?" What is common sense? Common sense is defined by *Merriam-Webster* as, "sound and prudent judgment based on a simple perception of the situation or facts. The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as, "the basic level of practical knowledge and judgment that we all need to help us live in a reasonable and safe way." Whichever definition is used, identifying particular items of knowledge as "common sense" is difficult. Common-sense ideas tend to relate to events within human experience.

For most youth and adults, their human experience is gleaned from their environment (home, school, or community) they live in. Thus it is good common sense to apply prevention efforts at the community level thus altering our shared environment to better sustain community level change. This approach is to attempt to alter the environment in which all children encounter threats to their health--including illicit drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. While we can offer a child or family many skills to utilize to help make healthy choices, they also need an environment where making healthy choices are normal.

A shared environment represents the world in which children face and cope with health threats. Properly designed and managed, the shared environment can support healthy behavior and thwart risky behavior for all children, regardless of how well prepared they may be by

their individualized environments. How do we shift our shared environment belief system from the ME to WE in an effort to support healthy behavior while thwarting risky behavior?

First we need to gauge the community's level of passion, energy, and engagement. Where people care deeply, the energy and passion is high. When people are not overly concerned with anything more than what they get out of the community experience, there is apathy and a low-level of engagement. Some measure of intensity is a good thing. We must cross reference this with the overall quality of relationships and commitment to building community or shared environments.

Where people form strong relationships, the energy and commitment is positive; where people form poor relationships (or where relationships simply aren't important) the energy and commitment is low or negative. Where the passion is low and the relationships are poor, people are relatively disengaged and the environment is resigned. It is very easy for people to "check-out," to simply walk away and just stay home. People drift to inactivity when the commitment and connection is low. This is often during times of conflict comprising the resigned environment within the community.

Where people hold deep, strong feelings and are committed to their own

opinions and agenda, but where the relationships are weak, the environment is generally corrosive and often toxic. Here, the needs of the individual always eclipse the good of the whole group. Individuals are committed to getting their own way, regardless of the cost to the community as a whole. For



example, individuals know that driving while under the influence is illegal but do it anyway because it's Vernonia. Further, the police are often given a bad time because they are doing their job: enforcing local, state and federal laws for the greater good.

This type of environment is perpetually engaged in some conflict, and there is an abundance of finger-pointing, blaming, hurt feelings, gossip, rumor, innuendo, and back-stabbing. This environment only requires a few participants to impact (negatively) the entire community. The destructive potential of allowing this environment to dominate is immeasurable. These groups have strong feelings but the passions for engagement in programs and community service to make change are slight. They

believe their community is a place to feel good, meet friends and to be with like-minded people.

On the reverse, these same individuals believe they should not expect to be challenged, asked to change or be burdened. Many times people have been over heard saying, "...that's how it's always been." This is a comfortable environment for them: high regard with low demand. In this environment, people come to events to see what they can get out of it, and mostly they receive the good feeling that comes from friendly and pleasant experiences. Often this environment is mistaken for a healthy environment; the absence of conflict,

stress and tension lulls us into believing that things couldn't possibly be better. However, all it takes is a dividing issue to arise and we find that our comfortable environment turns corrosive in an instant.

The truly healthy, creative, productive environment comes when we can blend the energy and passions of the whole group with a strong concern and regard for healthy relationships. When the "We" supersedes the "Me" in a community, the effect is transformative. Where "all of us together" is more important than any one individual, a safe and healthy community is truly possible. Those environments that work against healthy, creative productivity (resigned, corrosive, and comfortable) are all "entitlement" environments. These environments are created and sustained by the singular question, "What's in it for me?"

The very mission of the Vernonia Prevention Coalition is to increase capacity for organizations, school and the community by challenging assumptions and expectations to better understand the nature a safe and healthy community. Avoiding conflict is no solution. We must learn to navigate the difficulties of differing values and opinions while creating healthy, productive, creative shared environments. This can begin by asking, "What is in it for us?" It's just good common sense.

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## Parents - Keep Talking

Most Vernonia 8th graders, up to 81%, report their parents have CLEAR rules about alcohol and drugs. (Student Wellness Survey, 2012)

Most Vernonia 8th graders, between 82% - 95%, report their parents would think it is very wrong to use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. (Student Wellness Survey, 2012)

Most Vernonia 8th graders, between 85% - 98%, report zero times of trying alcohol, tobacco or other drugs. (Student Wellness Survey, 2012)

**They are listening!**

### 2012-2013 Vernonia Prevention Coalition Sector Representatives

| Position      | Name             | Sector        | Contact        | Affiliation                                 |
|---------------|------------------|---------------|----------------|---|
| Chair         | Josette Mitchell | Government    | (503) 429-4232 | COV Mayor                                   |
| Vice Chair    | Pete Weisel      | School        | (503) 429-3521 | VHS Councilor                               |
| Exec. Board   | Dr. Ken Cox      | Media         | (503) 429-5891 | VSD Superintendent                          |
| Exec. Board   | Shawn Carnahan   | Police        | (503) 429-4232 | COV Police                                  |
| Board Member  | Nic Welch        | Faith         | (503) 748-9193 | Vernonia Comm. Church                       |
| Sector Member | Mark Brown       | Faith         | (503) 961-5281 | Vernonia Comm. Church                       |
| Board Member  | Breanne Mares    | Prevention    | (503) 396-7637 | Col. County Mental Health                   |
| Board Member  | Heidi Brown      | Business      | (503) 429-2787 | Grey Dawn Gallery                           |
| Board Member  | Gina Fields      | Parent        | (503) 429-6306 | Parent Teacher Association                  |
| Board Member  | Kathy Kelly      | Youth Serving | (503) 369-7249 | Vernonia Head Start                         |
| Board Member  | Alexis Baska     | Youth         | (503) 429-3521 | O.S.S.O.M.                                  |
| Sector Member | Michal Bathurst  | Youth         | (503) 429-3521 | O.S.S.O.M.                                  |
| Board Member  | George Tice      | Civic Org.    | (503) 880-1627 | Lions Club                                  |
| Board Member  | Ashley Swanson   | Health Serv.  | (503) 396-2074 | Public Health Foundation of Columbia County |
|               | Heather Lewis    | Contractor    | (503) 429-4677 | Resource Coordinator                        |

**VPC Mission:**

To develop safe and healthy neighborhoods through collaborative planning, community action, policy advocacy and enforcement.

## National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-TALK (8255)  
suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Are you feeling desperate, alone or hopeless? Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline a free, 24-hour hotline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. Your call will be routed to the nearest crisis center to you.

Veterans Suicide Prevention Hotline  
1-800-273-TALK (8255) Press 1

**BECAUSE LIFE ISN'T  
WARM &  
FUZZY  
ALL THE TIME**

youthline

1-877-968-8491  
oregonyouthline.org

Or Text  
teen2teen  
to 66746

Teens Talking to  
Teens About  
Teen Stuff

Safe  
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