

Impact of Project Amp: Qualitative Findings

What is Project Amp?

Project Amp is an innovative substance use prevention and early intervention model for youth. The model engages young adult peer mentors with lived experience to deliver 4-6 one-on-one sessions and is designed to prevent and delay substance use among adolescents by mitigating risk factors and strengthening protective factors.

From 2020-2022, the C4 Innovations Project Amp team conducted a pre/post evaluation of Project Amp in three communities: Johns Creek, Georgia, Taos, New Mexico, and Lorain County, Ohio. The team conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven Project Amp students and thirteen community partners, school administrators, and Project Amp mentors to better understand the impact



Impact on YOUTH

1. Improves stress management and positive coping mechanisms. Project Amp Youth expressed gratitude that they could decompress and focus on their wellbeing during the school day through being in sessions. In sessions they were provided the space and tools to build and nurture emotional intelligence, communication strategies, and healthy coping skills. Youth enjoyed taking the time to have “deep conversations” with a mentor about how they were doing.

“For me, [the greatest impact] was on how I was handling stress—how to manage or deal with outbursts of emotions I had. I have more trust in my ability to manage that when it comes up. I have some tools now. I got a worksheet—the emotion wheel— that I still use. Sometimes all I feel is a heavy emotion, but I don’t know what I’m feeling. That wheel helped me identify it.”
 – Project Amp Youth Participant

“All of the students I met with developed coping skills and the ability to communicate their emotions.”
 – Project Amp Youth Mentor

2. Greater resonance with youth than traditional substance use prevention programming. Even though many youth had heard substance use prevention messages before, Project Amp mentors were able to “get through” to youth in a way that other programs could not. Project Amp Youth were surprised by how honest their mentors were with them in conversations about substance use and appreciated their mentor’s frank and unbiased guidance.

“There’s always the ‘don’t do drugs and here’s why’ talk in schools. But my mentor told me, ‘Just keep in mind that your brain is still developing at this age.’ She told me more about brain chemistry, and I was like, ‘YES, that is the reason I shouldn’t do drugs at a young age.’ It’s not going to make me lose my mortgage, that doesn’t apply to me at this point in my life. It’s because my brain is still developing, and I need to be kind to my body while it is.”
 –Project Amp Youth Participant

“A lot of representatives of programs like this come in and you can just tell, they’re like, ‘Okay, I talked to kids about this and now they’re changed forever.’ We all liked [our Project Amp mentor] because, like, he knew that some people didn’t listen, but talked to them anyway, because he knew some of them needed it.”

– Project Amp Youth Participant

Impact on MENTORS

- 3. Provides young adult peers with meaningful professional development opportunities, ultimately strengthening peer recovery and recovery networks.** Project Amp mentors are often already informal mentors in their communities. Project Amp enables them to build upon their innate talents and develop skills in motivational interviewing, cultural humility, and youth engagement; skills that deepen their impact on youth.

Project Amp can also serve as an entry point into the behavioral health field. Several mentors shared future goals and plans to become social workers, therapists, and adult peer support workers. Further, mentors shared that their work with youth helped reinforce their own self-efficacy, positive communication skills and relationships, and capacity to cope with stress and difficult situations, bolstering confidence in their ability to succeed in their chosen field.

“The trainings helped for me. I’ve been a mentor my whole life, but I didn’t know the language. So, getting the language and tools helped me help people dig deeper. I could lead them to the water instead of telling them what’s wrong with them.”

– Project Amp Mentor

“It’s a great way to turn my lived experience into something positive. If I had someone to talk to when I was younger and going through everything, I would have made some different decisions. It allows me to take my lived experience and turn it into something positive and give back to the community. When I’m meeting with a mentee it’s like working with a mirror and I can finally help someone else.”

– Project Amp Mentor

Impact on COMMUNITY

- 4. Helps meet need for youth behavioral health support.** Students, community members, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders acknowledged that youth are looking for mental health support, meaningful connection, and compassionate guidance. They believe that skilled, young adult peer mentors delivering a short-term, strengths-based curriculum helps meet those multi-faceted needs of youth and has great community benefit.

“The needs of our community are great. Whether we want to admit it or not our kids are using drugs and our kids are having sex. Our kids are also contemplating suicide. Project Amp can provide that space of open conversation, to talk about untalkable subjects that will help kids normalize their thoughts and feelings.”

– School Principal at Project Amp Site

“[Project Amp] offers the parents a trusted space for their kids to be open, honest, and share and receive educated feedback vs. listening to their peers who are suffering as much as they are and getting bad advice. Project Amp mentors offer that good open space, adult space, and relatable space that kids feel comfortable enough to share what’s going on with them.”

– School Counselor at Project Amp Site

- 5. Expands capacity in community mental health and substance use prevention services.** Behavioral health systems are overwhelmed. Skilled young adult peer mentors add capacity and dimension to the mental health and substance use prevention workforces, lessening the burden on clinicians, doctors, and school counselors while providing youth with a safe, relatable adult to talk to.

“We have a shortage of mental health providers in our community...There’s nothing we can do about increasing the workforce immediately. It’s getting expensive to live here, it’s hard to get people here, there’s a gamut of reasons that there’s a lack of mental health providers here. It’s not only just giving people the access to mental health, but it is giving people training who hopefully will stay within the community. It’s giving that skillset and interest into going into that field.”

– Project Amp Community Partner

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- 6. Project Amp mentors are a credible, safe, relatable source of support for youth.** The near-age peer model is highly acceptable in communities, and stakeholders believe that they can provide support that older adults cannot.

“The role that [Project Amp] provides is a trusted adult that could assist a teenager with life choices, life thoughts, life ideas. It offers the parents a trusted space for their kids to be open, honest, and share and receive educated feedback vs. listening to their peers who are suffering as much as they are and getting bad advice. Project Amp mentors offer that good open space, adult space, and relatable space that kids feel comfortable enough to share what’s going on with them.”

– School Counselor at Project Amp Site

“[Project Amp] adds incredible value because one of the biggest things that young people struggle with is, “Adults don’t understand me.” So having a young adult mentor that is close enough to their age, looks like them, and understands their culture and context, and is an authentic and real person is really attractive to them. That provides a lot of value to them, that allows for that connection. If you don’t connect with someone in a relationship, then what’s it for?”

– School counselor at Project Amp Site

