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Professionals learn about 'social norms'

By Gae Kane
Staff Writer

DUBOIS — Regional social services agencies attended a conference hosted by the Clearfield-Jefferson Drug-free Communities Coalition on Friday during which Dr. H. Wesley Perkins presented information on what is termed the Social Norms Approach to Health Promotion and Prevention.

This approach looks at how information is perceived, which is key in affecting the resulting behavior. The way something is said makes a difference in how it is understood.

Advertisers understand the concept — it is their job to be experts in selling an idea or product. The easiest example of this concept, and one every parent has heard over and over again — is the “everyone else attitude,” which children use to justify why they should be allowed to do something.

The need to wear a certain brand of shoes, go to a certain party, or behave in a certain way are all colored by what they *think* is the norm — or what everyone else is doing, according to Dr. Perkins.

To some degree, Dr. Perkins said, we all follow this pattern of behavior.

Advertisers know that they can apply this common behavior to critical messages, which can make a big difference, changing

a behavior or selling a product, but this concept can also affect the effectiveness of social messages such as the American Safety Council's “There are a million and one excuses for not wearing a safety belt. Some are real killers.”

Dr. Perkins developed the Social Norms Approach while teaching at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, N.Y. Using an example from a Montana drinking and driving campaign as an example, Dr. Perkins illustrated how social norms can be affected through the perception of a message.

The script for the Montana ad, which is set in a barn where a family is getting ready to ride their horses, reads, “In Montana, our best defense against drinking and driving is each other. Most of us prevent drinking and driving. We take care of our friends, our families, and ourselves. Four out of five young adults don't drink and drive. Thanks for doing your part.”

This ad was sponsored by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. As a result of the campaign, the percentage of young adults who drink and drive was reduced by more than 13 percent. Young adults who asked a friend to drive if they would be drinking rose to 15 percent. Changes were made in the number of fatal alcohol-related crashes in the state.



An innovative approach to getting positive messages out was the topic at a region-wide conference of the Clearfield-Jefferson Drug Free Communities Coalition presented Friday, which featured Dr. Wesley Perkins. Representatives from many of the social services agencies in the region attended. Seated, from left, are Keila Good, community mobilizer, Clearfield County Collaboration and Prevention Board; Susan Ford, deputy director, Clearfield-Jefferson Drug and Alcohol Commission; Dr. Perkins; and Rachael Johnson, Clearfield Jefferson Drug Free Communities Coalition coordinator. Standing: Laurie Filitske, director of Family Support, Cen-Clear Child Services Inc.; and Tracy Weaver, community outreach coordinator. (Photo by Gae Kane.)

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Dr. Perkins pointed out that how the message, the presentation of facts, can and does affect behavior. "Kids," Dr. Perkins said, "don't want us to tell them not to do something that they aren't doing in the first place. Confirm what they are doing and validate this behavior."

Dr. Perkins received the Bachelor of Arts in sociology from Purdue University, an M.Div. degree from Yale University Divinity School, and the Master of Arts and Ph.D. in

sociology from Yale University. He is professor of sociology and chairman of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.

In 1993 he was honored with Hobart and William Smith's faculty prize for outstanding scholarship and in 1997 he received the faculty prize for outstanding service to the college community honoring his work to reduce alcohol abuse among students.

He is project director of the

Alcohol Education Project at Hobart and William Smith, an initiative providing research, educational resources, and strategies to reduce alcohol and other drug abuse throughout the U.S. and internationally. In 1999 and again in 2005 the Project received a from the U.S. Department of Education as a Model Prevention Program in Higher Education.

For more information on Dr. Perkins refer to his Web site at <http://alcohol.hws.edu>.