keepin' it REAL

SUPER: Substance Use Prevention Evidence-Based Resource, UCLA ISAP
Developer website: https://realprevention.org/keepin-it-real/
Practice record last updated August 29, 2025

Cost	Prevention Category	Practice Focus	Practice Focus
Over $500	**Universal Direct**	**SU**	**MH**

Practice Summary

keepin’ it REAL (kiR) is a youth-focused substance use prevention program designed to build social, emotional, and resistance skills. The ten-lesson curriculum (45 minutes each) emphasizes refusal strategies: Refuse, Explain, Avoid, Leave. Lessons use real teens' stories, videos, and role-play to reinforce practical skills. An optional booster intervention teaches youth to create prevention media. The “from kids…through kids…to kids” approach enhances relatability, helping youth resist substance use and make healthy decisions.

Practice Details

Substance Use Prevention Category	• Universal Direct
Practice Level	• Individual • Relationship
Substance Use Prevention Strategy	• Education
Practice Components	**Individual** • Communication Skills Training • Cognitive Behavioral Strategies • Cultural/Religious Focus • Psychoeducation • Self-Efficacy or Self-Esteem Enhancement • Skills Training **Relationship** • Peer Norm Development • Peer-Led Approaches **Community/Society** • None
Population Age	• Age 6-12 • Age 13-17 • Age 18-20
Populations of Focus	• Black or African American • General Population • Hispanic or Latino
Settings	• School (K-12) • Community-based program
Parent/Caregiver Involvement	• No parent or caregiver involvement

Recommended Staffing	• Community members • Health or social work counselor, therapist or professional (unlicensed) • Law enforcement • Mentors • Peers • Prevention staff • Teachers or educators
Prevention Focus	**Substance Use Prevention Focus** • Alcohol • Cannabis • Inhalants • Substance Use - General • Tobacco **Mental Health Wellness and Promotion Focus** • Mental Health - General
Training and Technical Assistance	The kiR program offers implementation support through structured training workshops. These workshops prepare educators and facilitators to effectively deliver the program's curriculum and resistance strategies. Technical support is provided during and after implementation to assist with any issues or challenges.
Program Costs	Over $500. Please visit the developer's website listed above for updated information about implementation costs.
Adaptations	The main program is universal, but there are versions of the practice geared specifically to the cultures of African-American and Latino youth, including a Spanish language version that has been tested extensively across Mexico.

Risk and Protective Factors

Youth Substance Use Risk and Protective Factors

Level	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Individual	• Early and persistent antisocial behavior • Early initiation of substance use • Favorable attitudes towards substance use • Rebelliousness • Poor coping skills and behaviors	• Ability to adapt to change and the belief in one's ability to control what happens • Positive social orientation (e.g. engaging in healthy activities, accepting rules and community values, positive social engagement) • Positive temperament • Emotional self-regulation • High self-esteem • Personal engagement in two or more of the following: school, peers, athletics, employment, religion/spirituality, culture • Strong coping skills (e.g., problem-solving skills, ability to stand up for beliefs and values)
Family and Relationships	• None	• Clear expectations for behaviors and values

Level	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
School, Peer, and Community	• Accessibility or availability of substances • Norms favorable towards substance use • Substance use among peers	• Community norms, beliefs, and standards against substance use • Opportunities for the development of skills and interests • Opportunities for prosocial engagement in the school and community • Positive social norms

Youth Mental Health Risk and Protective Factors

Level	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Individual	• Low self-esteem • Poor coping skills and behaviors	• Emotional self-regulation • High self-esteem • Personal engagement in two or more of the following: school, peers, athletics, employment, religion/spirituality, culture • Strong coping skills (e.g., problem-solving skills, ability to stand up for beliefs and values)
Family and Relationships	• None	• Clear expectations for behaviors and values
School, Peer, and Community	• Norms favorable towards substance use • Substance use among peers	• Opportunities for prosocial engagement in the school and community • Positive social norms

Shared Substance Use and Mental Health Risk and Protective Factors

Level	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Individual	• Poor coping skills and behaviors	• Emotional self-regulation • High self-esteem • Personal engagement in two or more of the following: school, peers, athletics, employment, religion/spirituality, culture • Strong coping skills (e.g., problem-solving skills, ability to stand up for beliefs and values)
Family and Relationships	• None	• Clear expectations for behaviors and values
School, Peer, and Community	• Norms favorable towards substance use • Substance use among peers	• Opportunities for prosocial engagement in the school and community • Positive social norms

Empirical Evidence of Impact

Prevention Focus	Outcome	Population Age	Evidence Strength and Study Populations of Focus
Alcohol	Changes in Knowledge, Attitudes, or Beliefs	7th grade	Promising (General Population) [References 1]
Alcohol	Reduced Use or Delayed Initiation	5th grade	Moderate (Hispanic/Latino) [References 2-3]
Alcohol	Reduced Use or Delayed Initiation	7th grade	Strong (General Population) [References 1, 4-5]

Prevention Focus	Outcome	Population Age	Evidence Strength and Study Populations of Focus
Alcohol	Reduced Use or Delayed Initiation	9th grade	Promising (General Population) [References 6]
Cannabis	Changes in Knowledge, Attitudes, or Beliefs	7th grade	Moderate (General Population) [References 1]
Cannabis	Reduced Use or Delayed Initiation	5th grade	Promising (Hispanic/Latino) [References 2-3]
Cannabis	Reduced Use or Delayed Initiation	7th grade	Moderate (General Population) [References 1, 4-5]
Inhalants	Reduced Use or Delayed Initiation	5th grade	Promising (Hispanic/Latino) [References 2]
Inhalants	Reduced Use or Delayed Initiation	7th grade	Moderate (Hispanic/Latino) [References 2]
Tobacco	Changes in Knowledge, Attitudes, or Beliefs	7th grade	Moderate (General Population) [References 1]
Tobacco	Reduced Use or Delayed Initiation	5th grade	Moderate (Hispanic/Latino) [References 2-3]
Tobacco	Reduced Use or Delayed Initiation	7th grade	Promising (General Population) [References 1, 4-5]
Tobacco	Reduced Use or Delayed Initiation	9th grade	Moderate (General Population) [References 6]
Substance Use (General)	Changes in Knowledge, Attitudes, or Beliefs	5th-6th grade	Moderate (General Population) [References 3,7]
Mental Health (General)	Behavior, Attitudes, and Functioning	6th grade	Moderate (General Population) [References 7]
Mental Health (General)	Improved Relationships and Community Connectedness	6th grade	Moderate (General Population) [References 7]

References

[1] Hecht, M. L., Marsiglia, F. F., Elek, E., Wagstaff, D. A., Kulis, S., Dustman, P., & Miller-Day, M. (2003). Culturally grounded substance use prevention: an evaluation of the keepin' it R.E.A.L. curriculum. *Prevention Science, 4*(4), 233–248. https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1026016131401

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[3] Hansen W.B., Beamon E.R., Saldana S, Kelly S, Wyrick D.L. (2023). D.A.R.E./keepin' it REAL elementary curriculum: Substance use outcomes. *PLoS ONE, 18*(4), e0284457. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0284457

[4] Hecht, M. L., Graham, J. W., & Elek, E. (2006). The drug resistance strategies intervention: Program effects on substance use. *Health Communication, 20*(3), 267-276. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327027hc2003_6

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[6] Hecht, M. L., Shin, Y., Pettigrew, J., Miller-Day, M., & Krieger, J. L. (2018). Designed cultural adaptation and delivery quality in rural substance use prevention: an effectiveness trial for the keepin' it REAL curriculum. *Prevention Science, 19*(8), 1008-1018. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-018-0937-y

[7] Day, L. E., Miller-Day, M., Hecht, M. L., & Fehmie, D. (2017). Coming to the new DARE: a preliminary test of the officer-taught elementary keepin'it REAL curriculum. *Addictive Behaviors, 74*, 67-73. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2017.05.025

What California Providers Are Saying

What They Like About Keepin' it REAL:

- Evidence-based curriculum that has been a major selling point with school leadership.
- Common Core aligned, which helps with school administrator buy-in.
- Workbook is well organized and easy to teach from.
- Directly addresses topics students find personally relevant, especially stress.
- Engaging enough that an experienced teacher has taught it for 8 years without growing tired of it.

- Framing as a "life coach" approach rather than a directive "don't" message resonates with students.
- Pre/post tests show significant improvements in student knowledge.
- Teachers and parents provide positive feedback consistently.
- Former students have reported continuing to avoid substance use after the program.

Tips and Recommendations for Implementing Keepin' it REAL:

- Expect to explain that this is not the original D.A.R.E. program — communities often remember the old version.
- Lead with the evidence base when seeking buy-in from school leadership and administrators.
- Training walks instructors through each lesson and includes peer-to-peer teaching practice.
- Prepare for schools that lack AV equipment — facilitators may need to teach without slides.
- Bring creative supplements (coloring pages, dry-erase drawings, visual goal-setting activities) to enhance engagement.
- Frame your role as helping students identify the lives they want, rather than dictating choices.
- Address stress and coping directly — students appreciate the program's openness on this topic.