



ThinkFirst: Primary Prevention That Makes a Difference

The Premier Resource for Injury Prevention Educational Programs
Since 1986

Traumatic injuries are a leading cause of death and disability in the United State: the number one cause of death for ages one through 44. Each year there are more than 190,000 deaths and 27 million nonfatal injuries due to traumatic injuries caused by motor vehicle crashes, violence, falls, sports and other causes (WISQARS 2015). While brain and spinal cord injuries can lead to permanent disabilities, other injuries such as bone fractures, lacerations, back injuries and sprains also account for high numbers of emergency room visits and lost work time.

The ThinkFirst National Injury Prevention Foundation provides injury prevention programs to schools and community groups. Founded by the American Association of Neurological Surgeons and the Congress of Neurological Surgeons, ThinkFirst's mission is to prevent brain, spinal cord and other traumatic injuries through education, research and advocacy. As injury is a leading cause of death for children, teens and adults, ThinkFirst's goal is to help people make safe choices to prevent injury.

Through a network of more than 140 U.S. chapters, ThinkFirst incorporates evidence-based curriculum and dynamic presentations in their programs. VIP speakers – Voices for Injury Prevention—share their personal stories of how a brain, spinal cord or other traumatic injury affected their life forever. Together with injury prevention educators, they help students understand that injuries can happen to anyone, but are largely preventable if they “think first” to protect themselves. Topics focus on safe and sober driving, safety belt use, helmet use, sports and diving safety, prevention of falls and violence prevention. Program studies demonstrate evidence of an increase in safety knowledge attitudes and behavior choices among program participants.

The Theory Behind ThinkFirst

The ThinkFirst National Injury Prevention Foundation's educational programs are based on the Health Belief Model, and are congruent with Healthy People 2020. The ThinkFirst Foundation has developed and implemented programs that educate students on the ramifications of the most serious injuries, those to the brain and spinal cord. Students learn that we are not merely talking about a scrape on the knee or a bump on the head. We are talking about injuries that cause permanent damage to vital parts of the body, composed of nerves that are incapable of healing, causing disabling brain injuries or paralysis: permanent disabilities that scientists and physicians do not have cures for.

Programs utilize curriculum and multi-media presentations given by injury prevention specialists and VIP speakers. The injury prevention specialists explain the various causes of injury, how and why they occur and how they can be prevented through the actions we take. They also use models of the brain and spinal cord to explain the function of these systems and how injuries to these areas can cause paralysis and affect the brain's ability to control cognitive, emotional and physical functions.

A VIP speaker is a young adult who gives a personal testimony on the circumstances that lead to a brain or spinal cord injury, and how such an injury has been life altering. The VIP speaker puts a real face to the facts. Whether in video or in person, their stories hit home with the listener. They are people who had familiar goals and aspirations as a child, but because of choices they made, or a perpetrator made, their dreams were shattered. The audience recognizes the poor choice, and often can relate to a close call with similar circumstances. They hear the pain that was experienced at the scene, in the hospital, and in rehabilitation. They ask how their family and friends reacted when they went home, and how they dealt with their injury. They learn about the realities of life after paralysis: using a catheter to urinate, needing the assistance of family members to dress and bathe, learning to adjust to using a wheelchair and adaptive equipment. They learn about brain injuries causing loss of memory, loss of articulating thoughts, loss of personality . . . and loss of friends.

Programs, Tools and Curriculum

The ThinkFirst Foundation staff, with the assistance and consultation of the program advisory committee and outside experts, develops the injury prevention programs and tools for ThinkFirst chapter use. These are provided to new chapters and are also available through the ThinkFirst website, www.thinkfirst.org. The ThinkFirst Foundation encourages chapters to survey program participants on a regular basis to determine program effectiveness and opportunities for improvements. Several published studies showing increased knowledge, improved attitudes toward safety and stated behavior changes in students after participating in ThinkFirst programs can be found on the ThinkFirst website.

School programs include ThinkFirst For Kids, ThinkFirst For Youth, ThinkFirst For Teens and ThinkFirst About Concussion. Programs at all levels explain the anatomy of the delicate brain and spinal cord, how injuries to these areas can cause permanent disabilities and the importance of protecting our bodies. Safety topics include vehicle safety, bicycle safety, playground and sports safety, water safety, and violence prevention. The message is ThinkFirst: use your mind to protect your body! Students learn that while anyone can become injured, most injuries are preventable; we are each responsible for making safe choices to protect ourselves and others.

ThinkFirst For Kids is an evidence-based curriculum for grades 1-3, introducing “Street Smart,” the safety hero, and his friends through an animated video and song, followed by lessons and activities for the classroom teacher to utilize. ThinkFirst For Youth is also curriculum based, providing teachers in grades 4-8 with innovative safety lessons and activities to excite adolescents. Science lessons include anatomy of the brain and spinal cord, while games and exercises help students learn to confidently make safe choices on their own and with their peers.

ThinkFirst For Teens is a fast-paced, dynamic presentation for health classes, driver education classes or assemblies. Speakers who have sustained a brain or spinal cord injury share with students how an unsafe choice can change a person’s life forever. Through personal testimony, students learn the importance of making safe choices. This program is offered free of charge to high schools, middle schools and colleges.

ThinkFirst About Concussion was developed as a one-hour classroom presentation for teens that is given in health classes or to athletic groups. Students are taught that concussions are brain injuries that should be taken seriously. Information on preventing concussions, recognition of signs and symptoms, following guidelines when a concussion is suspected and seeking medical attention are discussed. Students learn the importance of following their physician’s instructions for rest, activity and return to play.

ThinkFirst to Prevent Falls is a program for older adults, available as 2 ½ hour and one-hour presentations, complete with PowerPoint slides, scripting and classroom handouts. This program is not to replace multi-week programs like Matter of Balance, but to offer alternative formats for those wanting basic information in one presentation. As with all ThinkFirst programs, evaluation tools are provided.

ThinkFirst For Your Baby is a four-hour program for new and expectant parents covering the issues of injury prevention for infants and young children. Shaken baby, car seat safety, safe sleep positioning, feeding, child-proofing the home and many other topics are covered.

Chapter Structure

The ability to reduce the incidence of injuries is dependent on wide-spread programming. The successful national reach of the ThinkFirst Foundation is due largely to the organized chapter structure and the relationship the Foundation has with the chapters. The Foundation and its committees develop and provide injury prevention training and program materials for chapter use. Annual chapter surveys track the number of programs given and the number of students reached; more than 7,000 presentations are given each year in the US alone, helping hundreds of thousands learn to reduce their risk for injury.

Trained chapters operate independently through hospitals, universities and other organizations, using ThinkFirst curriculum and materials to deliver ThinkFirst injury prevention programs to schools in their local communities. Each chapter has a sponsoring physician who helps with program promotion. Designated State Chapter and Training Centers coordinate ThinkFirst efforts with other chapters in their state. The State Chapter Directors Subcommittee is a close network, meeting monthly by teleconference for the purpose of chapter development.

State chapters and local chapters otherwise function equally in their local communities, recruiting and training speakers, scheduling and presenting programs to schools and community groups, and serving as injury prevention resources to their sponsoring organization and community. Many are involved in injury prevention coalitions at the local, state and national levels, working with DOT offices to meet traffic safety objectives.

ThinkFirst is also active worldwide, with more than 30 international chapters, including all Canadian provinces, Mexico, Peru, Italy, Jordan, Jamaica, Algeria, Nigeria, Senegal, Guinea, Columbia, Honduras, India, Taiwan, Chile and others.

ThinkFirst has been the recipient of many awards since its inception in 1986, including the Congress of Neurological Surgeons 2009 Distinguished Service Award.

The ThinkFirst Foundation is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. To learn more, access chapters and review studies and reports on ThinkFirst programs visit www.thinkfirst.org.

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