



Sun Safe in the Middle School Years

SCHOOL POLICY MANUAL

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Project Background

SunSafe in the Middle School Years is designed to improve sun protection behaviors of middle school students (10- to 13-year-olds). Originally developed in 2000, SunSafe in the Middle School Years was developed and tested using funding provided by the National Cancer Institute, and the project was directed by Ardis Olson, M.D. At the time, the project worked with schools, coaches, town recreation programs, parents, and health care providers in 10 communities throughout Vermont and New Hampshire.

This multi-component intervention demonstrates that community members can serve as role models and educators to change youth sun protection actions and thus reduce skin cancer risks. Findings from the original study includeⁱ:

- Youth in the intervention communities were more likely to use sunscreen and to apply it more thoroughly than those in the control communities.
- Youth in the intervention communities reported receiving sun protection advice from more adults than those in the control communities.
- Youth in the intervention communities protected more of their body from the sun than those in the control communities.

Why Middle School Students?

Middle school is an important time to work with youth. During this age, youth are making more independent health behavior choices but are still willing to listen to adults' advice and they are still influenced by the role modeling of parents, teachers, and coaches.

- 80% of lifetime sun exposure occurs before age 18.ⁱⁱ Only 35% of middle school students protect themselves from sun damage.
- In 2019, 66% of VT middle school students reported having at least one sunburn in the past 12 months. The percent of students who had sunburns increased with each grade level.ⁱⁱⁱ
- One or more blistering sunburns in childhood or adolescence doubles the risk of developing melanoma later in life.^{iv}
- 84% of middle school youth understand protecting themselves from sun damage can prevent skin cancer. However, less than one third (29%) use sunscreen and only 7% wear a hat (data from baseline of study – unpublished).

Why Schools?

- Adolescents spend most of their time at school and in school sponsored activities.
- Physical education classes, outings, and sports sponsored by schools are conducted outdoors, exposing teens to UV radiation.
- Health, science, and other curriculum offer opportunities to educate youth about harm from UV radiation and skin cancer.
- Teachers and school personnel also need protection from UV radiation while participating in school sponsored events or classes. Making a perfect opportunity for the students to learn by observing their teachers practicing sun safe behaviors.
- Students, teachers, and staff can all benefit from schools following the seven recommendations provided by the CDC to prevent skin cancer.

Guidelines for School Programs to Prevent Skin Cancer

The CDC developed the following seven recommendations for school programs to follow to prevent skin cancer.

1. Establish policies that reduce exposure of students and staff to UV radiation.
2. Provide an environment that supports sun-safety practices.
3. Provide health education to teach students the knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral skills they need to prevent skin cancer.
4. Involve family members in skin cancer prevention efforts.
5. Include skin cancer prevention with professional development of staff.
6. Complement and support skin cancer prevention with school health services.
7. Periodically evaluate whether schools are implementing the skin cancer prevention guidelines.

These recommendations were first published in 2002 by the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, the report can be read in its entirety at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5104a1.htm>.

The summary of these recommendations can be found on the following CDC website: www.cdc.gov/cancer/skin/what_cdc_is_doing/guidelines.htm.

Effective Ways to Promote Sun Safety

Schools that participated in the 2003 – 2007 Sun Safety study found one effective and simple method for promoting sun safety. This was to include sun protection language on permission slips for outings and athletics. Examples of language used by these schools are included below.

- Unprotected exposure to the sun in childhood and adolescence significantly increases the risk of developing skin cancer in later life. Exposure at any stage of life can add to the risk of cancer. Our school is committed to reducing exposure of staff and students to the sun’s harmful UV rays, thus reducing their lifetime risk of skin cancer.
- Unless parental consent has been given, a staff member will not apply sunscreen to any student. When the student is capable of applying their own sunscreen, they will be encouraged to do so. The school is not responsible for any sunburns suffered by students.
- All students are encouraged to protect themselves from UV damage by using appropriate protective measures including clothing, sunscreen, sunglasses, and hats.
- Always wear sunscreen, a hat, and sunglasses when playing outside. Our New England sunshine is very strong. Even if you put sunscreen on in the morning, you still need to reapply it during the day.

Additional School Sun-Safety Policy Development Resource

Sun Safety for Kids

To counter the skin cancer epidemic, Sun Safety for Kids provides information for school and summer camp administrators to use in developing sun safety programs for the purpose of protecting children from the cancer-causing effects of sun exposure. The *Los Angeles Metropolitan Dermatological Society* developed this resource.

www.sunsafetyforkids.org

ⁱ Ardis L. Olson, Cecelia Gaffney, Pamela Starr, Jennifer J. Gibson, Bernard F. Cole, Allen J. Dietrich; SunSafe in the Middle School Years: A Community-wide Intervention to Change Early-Adolescent Sun Protection. *Pediatrics* January 2007; 119 (1): e247–e256. 10.1542/peds.2006-1579.

<https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2006-1579>

ⁱⁱ Cleveland Clinic (2022). Ultraviolet Radiation and Skin Cancer.

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/10985-ultraviolet-radiation>

ⁱⁱⁱ Vermont Department of Health. (2020). 2019 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey Report, 173.

www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/CHS_YRBS_statewide_report.pdf

^{iv} Skin Cancer Foundation. (2021). Sunburn & Your Skin. www.skincancer.org/risk-factors/sunburn/