

# ThinkFirst: Using Your Mind to Protect Your Body

By Debby Gerhardstein

**T**raumatic injuries are a leading cause of death and disability in the United States: the number one cause of death for ages one through 44. Each year there are more than 160,000 deaths and 29 million nonfatal injuries due to traumatic injuries caused by motor vehicle crashes, violence, falls, sports and other causes (CDC 2007). While brain and spinal cord injuries (SCI) 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 is in its 22nd year providing 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 be a leader in injury prevention through education, research and public policy by offering theory-based and evidence-based educational programs to schools and community groups. As injury is the leading cause of death for children, teens and young adults, ThinkFirst's goal is to help students make safe choices to prevent injury. Through a network of more than 200 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 specialists, 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.

Students learn about the permanence of the most serious injuries, those to the brain and spinal cord, through literacy-based curriculum, engaging presentations, and by hearing from our VIP speakers. Program studies demonstrate evidence of increased knowledge and increased safe behavior choices among program participants.

## The Theory behind ThinkFirst

ThinkFirst educational programs are based on the Health Belief Model, and are congruent with Healthy People 2010. 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, causing disabling brain injuries or paralysis: permanent disabilities

which scientists and physicians currently cannot cure.

Programs utilize curriculum and multimedia 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

thoughts, loss of personality . . . and loss of friends.

## Programs, Tools and Curriculum

ThinkFirst staff, with the assistance or consultation of the program advisory committee and outside experts, develops the injury prevention programs and tools for ThinkFirst chapter use. These are available to chapters, along with chapter training. ThinkFirst encourages chapters to survey

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.

## Chapter Structure

The ability to reduce the incidence of injuries is dependent on wide-spread programming. The successful national reach of ThinkFirst is due largely to the organized chapter structure and the relationship the Foundation has with the chapters.

Trained chapters operate independently through hospitals, universities and medical offices, 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 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.

## Improving Quality of Life for People with Disabilities

While injury prevention is clearly the primary mission of ThinkFirst, the program creates two additional powerful opportunities for improving the quality of life for people with SCI and other disabilities.

First is a direct opportunity for individuals with SCI to participate actively in their local communities and schools. As part of the process, they also receive presentation skills training that could prove useful in a myriad of ways, not the least of which is in gaining employment. For some, the experience is actually a “first job” after injury, as VIP speakers are compensated for their presentations.

Second, ThinkFirst brings an accurate and positive “disability awareness” message to young people, providing many children and teens with their first direct personal interaction with someone with a disability; someone who has overcome obstacles and is dedicated to helping others “think first.”

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Photo courtesy ThinkFirst Iowa

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 an 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

program participants on a regular basis to determine program effectiveness and opportunities for improvements. Several published studies showing increased knowledge and behavior changes in students after participating in ThinkFirst programs can be found on our website.

Programs include ThinkFirst for Kids, ThinkFirst for Youth and ThinkFirst for Teens. 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 “think first: 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