

Press Release

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### **SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: Fighting The Opioid Crisis With a Video Game**

A recent article in The Washington Post discusses a research study funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in their effort to combat the opioid crisis. A record number of people in the United States died from drug overdoses last year as the death toll rose by 30 percent from 2019 to over 93,000, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Almost 70,000 deaths involved opioids. In San Francisco, more than twice as many people died from drug overdoses than covid-19, reflecting a statewide 45.9 percent increase in drug overdose deaths.

As drug-related deaths have spiked across the United States in recent years, doctors have developed an unlikely new tool: a video titled “PlaySmart,” developed by Lynn Fiellin, professor at the Yale School of Medicine and Yale Child Study Center, as well as the founder and director of the play2PREVENT video game development lab. Fiellin hopes that by using “PlaySmart,” she and her colleagues will be able to collect more data related to adolescent opioid misuse and provide aid to both kids who play the game and the adults who work with them. Fiellin maintains the more you know that something is dangerous, the less likely you are to do it but youth have very inaccurate perception of risk of harm for opioids ... and then there are the ones who do know it’s dangerous, but just don’t know how to say no. There is a science of negotiation — science around how to say no and still preserve your position in your peer group.

While “PlaySmart” is a video game, it’s not one that’s likely to spark a massive following on YouTube but the creators hope it can provide another avenue for treatment and prevention of drug abuse, along with the more traditional methods of intervention such as pharmaceuticals, therapy and in-school lesson plans. In addition to imparting players with information that can help them avoid drug misuse, the game also provides data to researchers — based on the players’ decisions in the game — to better inform drug awareness and prevention programs. Fiellin said another goal is to promote mental health and well-being more broadly.

“PlaySmart” is one of several games that have been funded over the past decade by the National Institutes of Health and developed by Yale University’s play2PREVENT Lab, which designs games to promote “health, wellness, education and social intelligence.” “PlaySmart” saw promising results in its

pilot study earlier this year, according to Fiellin who reported that players showed increased knowledge about opioids as well as improved decision-making skills after playing the game. The play2PREVENT Lab, founded in 2009, has created five video games about issues related to adolescent drug use, STI/HIV testing and prevention, and mental resilience. Similar to its other offerings, “PlaySmart” is a character-driven, cartoon choose-your-own-adventure style game where the players are placed into various situations, such as a party, and shown what happens if they make certain choices, such as kissing a person with herpes. The player is then taken through the consequences of that decision before being allowed to “go back in time” and make a different choice. The game also involves mini games that enable players to build up various skill sets, like persuasion, to better equip their characters to handle certain situations in the game.

Beyond attempting to teach young people how to respond to difficult situations, the games have also been a source of data collection, allowing researchers to better understand what players know about opioid abuse and other high-risk behaviors. Results from the lab’s studies have been published in peer-reviewed journals including Elsevier, Oxford University’s Health Education Research and Health Promotion Practice. Player data from “PlaySmart” will be evaluated by Fiellin and her colleagues over a two-year period where they will comb through self-reported data from participants and millions of log files generated by the game with the help of machine learning and other data specialists. Starting in September, their study will assess the gameplay of 532 adolescents between 16 and 19 years old, some of whom will play the actual game while others play different, commercial games as part of the randomized, controlled trial. The study will focus on how the game impacts players’ knowledge about the risks of opioid misuse, ability to use skills taught in the game and whether they have experimented with opioids. It’s the ability to use something that’s fun and engaging, and that people really like, to deliver serious health information and skills building.

The Washington Post is a major American daily newspaper published in Washington, D.C. It has taken a leadership role in following the Nations opioid epidemic. Please visit The Post’s Opioid Files for more information at [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

The SAFE Glen Cove Coalition is conducting an opioid prevention awareness campaign entitled. “Keeping Glen Cove SAFE,” in order to educate and update the community regarding opioid use and its consequences. To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us on [www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition](https://www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition) or visit SAFE’s website to learn more about the Opioid Epidemic at [www.safeglencove.org](http://www.safeglencove.org).