

## Drug prevention in the community

### Introduction

The prevention of harmful drug use has become a priority in most communities in recent years. Concern and action by parents, families, schools, communities and governments have led to extensive research being conducted to find out how we can prevent or minimise the harms caused through the use of alcohol and other drugs.

This fact sheet aims to provide an introduction to some drug prevention strategies that have developed from recent research.

### Drug prevention strategies in Australia

Based on research conducted both locally and internationally over the past few decades, drug prevention initiatives in Australia increasingly have taken a 'developmental pathways' approach. This approach draws on what is known about how young people develop, patterns of drug use and misuse, and the effectiveness of early intervention.

### Risk factors

We now know that there is a strong relationship between early indicators (risk factors) and subsequent problems. Some of the risk factors associated with harmful drug use in young people include:

### Family influences

- family conflict
- family management problems

- family living in poverty
- parents using drugs and having positive attitudes toward drug use
- family history of drug abuse

### School influences

- academic failure and lack of attachment or commitment to school
- early and persistent problem behaviours, such as misbehaving in school or getting into fights with other children

### Personality and peer influences

- aggressive or problem behaviours
- rebelliousness and not feeling like they are a part of their community or society
- association with friends who are using alcohol or other drugs (peer acceptance)

### Community influences

- laws and regulations regarding drugs
- community attitudes toward drug use
- poor, deteriorating or crime-ridden neighbourhood
- availability of drugs in the community—for example, if it's easy to get cigarettes, alcohol, cannabis etc.

Although no single risk factor can be said to cause harmful drug use, the more risk factors a young person is exposed to, the greater the impact on their later development. Recent research in Australia indicates that the same risk factors which influence harmful drug use among young people can influence other



problems such as delinquency, homelessness, mental health problems and sexual risk taking.

### **Protective factors**

Research has also shown that it is possible to reduce the risks of harmful drug use by building up certain protective factors in young people. Some protective factors include:

- a sense of belonging or connectedness in the family
- a warm relationship with at least one parent or significant adult
- a sense of belonging and fitting in at school
- positive experiences and achievements at school
- having someone outside the family who believes in them
- having opportunities to be an active contributor in their family, school and community
- feeling loved and respected
- religious or spiritual connectedness.

Parents, families, schools, communities and government all have a role to play in preventing or reducing the risks and increasing the protective factors in young people.

### **Effective drug prevention**

The most effective drug prevention strategies are those which target more than one risk factor, are creatively integrated across the community and are coordinated through childhood and adolescence. These include family intervention, parent education, school drug education, school organisation and behaviour management, restrictions on the sale of alcohol and tobacco, and community mobilisation.

### **Community drug prevention**

Drug prevention strategies are implemented in the community through:

- Drug education—programs or information for adolescents and families
- Preventative case management—coordinated delivery of services to meet the needs of young people at risk
- Community mobilisation—health promotion activities and campaigns
- Health service re-orientation—enhancement of services and access to services by young people at risk
- Employment and training—provision of assistance, experience and training
- Laws, regulation, policing and enforcement—restrictions on the manufacture, sale and marketing of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs, and drug diversion programs
- Social marketing—using mass media to promote health messages to young people.

Although there is a growing knowledge base from the evaluation of current strategies, there is much that is not yet known about the effectiveness of certain prevention strategies. There is evidence to indicate that strategies such as laws and regulations restricting the manufacture and sale of alcohol and tobacco, school-based drug education and community action are effective strategies. Negative results have been highlighted in some studies of community based drug education, while more research is needed to establish the effectiveness of diversion programs and restrictions



on the marketing of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs. Therefore, it is important when initiating drug prevention strategies that programs are aligned with the evidence from current research and include provision for ongoing evaluation.

### **What is being done in the community?**

The National Illicit Drugs Strategy provides funding support for drug prevention initiatives in small communities, under the Commonwealth Government's Community Partnership Initiative. The Victorian Government is also supporting local communities in responding to drug issues. For example, the Emerging Hot Spots initiative is funding 29 drug prevention projects across 21 different municipalities in Melbourne.

A lot more is being done by communities themselves. In municipalities across Victoria are examples of community action, where representatives of health, welfare and education sectors; local Indigenous, religious, business and community groups; and members of the community, police and councils are working together to tackle drug and alcohol problems in their community. Examples of good practice in community drug prevention in Victoria include:

- Action Research Intervention and System Improvement Team (ARISIT) in the Grampians region, which uses a case-management approach across service sectors. Through partnerships, families, schools and workers in youth and community services are working together to reduce the risks and improve outcomes for young people in this region
- Clockwork Youth Health Service in Geelong, which provides a general practice that focuses on providing specialised health and well-being services for young people. Among others, the multidisciplinary team provides support for young people in crisis in addition to a caring and non-judgmental service for young people, holistic health care, and continuity of care and consultation.

### **Drug prevention benefits everyone**

Harmful drug use by young people is a concern for everyone. With the guidance and commitment of schools, workers, leaders and residents, communities can work towards the prevention of harmful drug use and improve the well-being of all members.

### **DrugInfo Clearinghouse Fact Sheets**

*Every two months the DrugInfo Clearinghouse produces new Fact Sheets on a specific aspect of drug prevention for parents, families, schools and workers. Our Prevention Research Evaluation Reports provide detailed information about the research on which we base our information. For further information, see our website at [www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au) or contact the Resource Centre on tel. 1300 85 85 84.*

*In November 2002 we look at drug education approaches in schools.*