

Drug prevention in the school setting

Introduction

Changes in families and the community outside the school over the past few decades have resulted in increasing challenges for teachers, schools and the education system as a whole. In addition to providing a caring and supportive learning environment, schools are expected to undertake activities that prevent high-risk behaviours among their students. One of these high-risk behaviours is harmful drug use.

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

What causes young people to engage in harmful drug use?

Research has shown a number of causes for young people engaging in high-risk behaviours, including harmful use of alcohol and other drugs. These causes, or risk factors, are organised according to the different influences on young people, such as family, school, friends and others in the community, as well as individual personality characteristics. Some risk factors include:

Family influences

- family conflict, such as arguments or members of the family often insulting or yelling at each other
- family management problems, such as not having clear standards or rules for

behaviour, and excessively severe or inconsistent punishment

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

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.

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)

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.

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

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among young people can influence other problems such as delinquency, homelessness, mental health problems and sexual risk taking.

What can be done to protect young people from these risks?

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, including:

- 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
- feeling loved and respected
- having opportunities to be an active contributor in their family, school and community
- 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.

Drug prevention strategies

The most effective drug prevention strategies are those which target more than one risk factor, are 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 action.

Drug prevention in schools

It has been argued that schools provide a highly cost-effective form of drug prevention, because it can reach all young people during their formative years. School drug education can reduce drug use and drug harms. This is supported by research on student use of alcohol. In a Western Australian study, researchers found that students involved in a school drug education program drank less alcohol and experienced fewer harms when drinking than the control group.

The most effective school drug education programs utilise interactive teaching strategies and organised, peer-led elements, and provide normative information about young people's drug use.

Clearly, schools are a vital part of linking drug prevention across the community, and school drug prevention strategies need to work in tandem with other strategies employed in other areas of the community. Many schools already do this in some very important ways, through:

- Drug education—delivery of a structured social-health, drug education curriculum within the school
- School organisation and behaviour management—preparation of students for transitions to primary and secondary schools; programs encouraging positive interpersonal relationships at school, such as mentoring and anti-bullying; policies and procedures to ensure effective discipline; and strategies to maximise



learning opportunities, such as breakfast clubs and homework clubs

- Mentorship—to develop pro-social relationships between young people and functioning adults within the community.

Issues in drug prevention

Although the research clearly indicates the value of a coordinated approach to drug prevention across family, school and community settings, there may be some barriers. One of these is the requirement for a longer-term approach—there are likely to be problems in funding programs over long periods. In addition, people often expect immediate results, so it may be difficult to link funded prevention programs aimed at children to later success in adults. Another problem is the difficulty in linking schools, communities and families over a long period of time.

These barriers or problems are not impossible to overcome. The effectiveness of

drug prevention programs in schools can be strengthened when supported by drug prevention initiatives across the community.

For example, a community approach to prevention might include:

- a school drug education program as part of the curriculum
- a parenting program to help families cope with the challenges of adolescence
- a community health promotion or awareness campaign promoting responsible attitudes and behaviours toward alcohol and other drugs.

Drug prevention benefits everyone

Harmful drug use by young people is a concern for everyone. Schools have an important role to play in drug prevention, but parents, families, schools and governments can all work together to prevent harmful drug use and to improve the well-being of all members of our community.

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, contact the Resource Centre on tel. 1300 85 85 84 or see our website at www.druginfo.adf.org.au.

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