

The Education of Most Worth: Preventing Drug and Alcohol Abuse

With innovative programs and support from parents and the community, schools can take a leading role in helping youngsters lead healthy, productive lives.



"There is a lot of drinking at parties. I think that if my mom knew some of the parties that I went to and saw the people that were around drinking, she would have a heart attack."

"Some people get totally plastered and tear the place apart, and it's an incredible party; or it might be just casual drinking, but not usually."

—From an interview with an anonymous teenager

In asking "What knowledge is of most worth?" the 19th century philosopher Herbert Spencer grouped human activities under five headings and then arranged them in order of importance. At the top of the list he put those activities directly related to self-preservation.

"Above all," Spencer wrote, "man needs knowledge to guard himself against the incapacities and slow annihilation that his own bad habits bring him." These wise words are on target today, as we face an epidemic of alcohol and other drug abuse. The statistics are distressingly familiar.

- Children are beginning alcohol use at an early age: the average beginning age is 12.5 years (Horton 1985).

- One-half of high school students are classified as regular drinkers, one of three drinks heavily at least once a week, one of four students in high school has a serious drinking problem, approximately four million youth under the age of 17 are alcoholics, and children as young as nine years old are being treated for alcoholism (Horton 1985).

- Teen drinkers account for nearly 50 percent of all fatal automobile accidents (Sherouse 1985).

- Some 80 percent of high school seniors have used marijuana, and two-thirds of American children will have used an illicit drug other than marijuana and alcohol before they graduate from high school (Johnson 1986).

Guidelines for School Action

As educators, parents, and citizens, we are concerned that past efforts to stem the tide of alcohol and other drug abuse have met with seeming failure. Yet there are actions we can take, and the schools must take a leading role.

Our efforts at drug prevention must concentrate on the "gateway" drugs, particularly alcohol. Alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco are referred to as gateway drugs because their use generally comes first. Alcohol is the drug of choice in this society. Not surprisingly, it is also the drug of choice among adolescents. Because it is readily available and because it holds a

unique and an ambivalent place in our collective lives, alcohol is the most dangerous drug in our society; yet—precisely because its use is so pervasive—it is the most difficult to teach about. Nevertheless, we must teach its dangers because it is potentially lethal and because it correlates highly with later use of "harder" drugs.

Because alcohol use is deeply embedded in our society, any efforts that fail to account for this fact are doomed to failure. Our efforts must be directed at mobilizing the community. Prevention of alcohol and other drug use must be a total community undertaking. If the larger environment is in conflict with the curriculum's message, school programs are next to worthless. Preparing new programs, designing new curriculums, or buying new packages of ready-made materials will not work. We can't just do more of what isn't working. Churches, social agencies, news media, police departments, judicial systems, and business interests must work together to create a drug-free environment for children and youth.

We need the courage to send a strong message to our young people that use of alcohol and other drugs is neither expected nor accepted in our schools and communities. We must reject the idea of teaching responsible use of alcohol; to do so is self-defeating and dangerous. Alcohol is illegal for underage people, and there can be no responsible use of an illegal substance. To suggest otherwise, either explicitly or implicitly, through a wink or a joke, is to weaken our role as educators and adults.

Our efforts in both the school and the community must begin early. Preventing abuse is easier than controlling it. At an early age, children need to be taught the dangers of drug use, just as they need to learn the dangers of touching something hot, running into the street, and playing with knives and guns. The understanding that drug use of any kind is dangerous and unacceptable must be unambiguously and forcefully conveyed early on.

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Being a role model where alcohol and tobacco use is concerned may not be comfortable for some parents and teachers, but doing so is essential if we are to help children acquire wholesome values. The easy way is to allow role models to emerge from the peer group, from sports and rock music stars, and from television—and not from ourselves. If we want drug-free children, we must observe what our actions say about our attitudes toward healthful living.

Our approach to drug problems in

the school must include a carrot and a stick. Resources for prevention and penalties for abuse must be well prepared and widely understood throughout the school. Support must be available for those youth who get into trouble with alcohol or other drugs. For those who refuse help or have repeated violations, the penalties must be swift and exact. Clear and specific rules with strong corrective actions will convey our message that any drug use in our schools is unacceptable.

We need to debunk the myths about adolescent alcohol use. The most dangerous myth is that alcohol use is a rite of passage into adult society. If we continue to convey our expectation that children will use alcohol, they will continue to meet that expectation. If children don't experiment, they will not become regular users. We must send an unambiguous message that no use of alcohol or other drugs is expected or acceptable, in any amount, at any time, under any condition for children and youth.

Another myth that educators need to overcome is that only particular types of students will get into trouble with alcohol and other drugs. This myth carries over to adult society and its stereotyping of adult alcoholics. Most alcoholics are not skid-row bums. Fewer than 3 percent of adult alcoholics are jobless, homeless, and without families; most are middle class, employed family members. Similarly, adolescent alcohol abusers are not from lower socioeconomic levels, nor are they academically inferior. The gifted athlete, the honor student, and the school leader are equally vulnerable to drug abuse and addiction. The standard joke is there are two kinds of kids who can have trouble with alcohol: boys and girls.

Among the other myths that retard our abilities to reduce or eliminate adolescent drug use are that one can

be too young to have an alcohol problem; that it is acceptable for boys but not girls to try alcohol; that getting drunk once is a learning experience that will preclude later heavy drinking (even one drink can kill); that drinking alcohol demonstrates masculinity; that intoxication is humorous; and that alcoholics are happy drunks. These and other myths need to be exposed for the accepting attitudes they create and for the unhealthy messages they send to young people.

We need to make more innovative use of available resources. Simply providing information to adolescents about the dangers of alcohol and other drugs is not enough. We must find more innovative ways to include social agencies, medical personnel, recovering alcoholics, professional alcohol counselors, students, and parents in developing and implementing abuse prevention and early intervention programs. We can try a variety of approaches. For example, peer counseling and support groups are useful and cost-effective. Small networks of parents of adolescents who agree to keep each other informed about teenage activities also work. In some communities, parents sign agreements stating that they will strictly enforce rules against alcohol use at teenager parties; that they will ensure that adult supervision is available for adolescent gatherings; and that each parent will be responsible for the welfare and behavior of all youngsters in the group. Teachers and administrators can be instrumental in organizing these parent networks. The schools will benefit not only from improved student conduct but from parental support as well.

We must set clear and realistic goals for our drug abuse prevention efforts. The problem of adolescent substance abuse is deep and pervasive. Even our best efforts are not going to solve the problem immediately, nor are we likely to solve it completely. We must fight the battle on many fronts and learn to applaud small victories. After all, most industries consider an increase of one or two percentage points of the market share a major gain for their compa-

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Resources

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nies. Similarly, small inroads into adolescent drug and alcohol use result in salvaged lives. Small gains in numbers represent teenagers who are more likely to have healthful and productive lives.

In addition, the evaluation of our efforts needs to be clearly related to our goals. Present programs may be failing because their goals are ambiguous. It is difficult to get agreement on the goals of abuse prevention activities, especially on goals about alcohol use. But as we consider the lives of our students, we should express those goals not only, not even primarily, in knowledge gained, but in attitudes developed and in behavior exhibited. Well-designed prevention and intervention activities, rooted in real-life activities and nurtured by community support, can save the lives of our children.

Our programs to prevent alcohol and drug abuse must be comprehensive and inclusive. The problem of alcohol and other drug use is so pervasive that no single or simple approach can solve it. In each community and in each school, the problem must be recognized and then creatively and courageously attacked. An alcohol problem in a school is not a negative reflection on the administration and faculty; failure to admit and work on the problem is.

The problem is massive, and the powerful influence of popular culture must be overcome. The liquor and beer interests spend billions of dollars to promote and glamorize addictive psychoactive drugs. Educators and parents need to analyze the distortions in advertising and to mobilize political force to protect children and youth. Ways must be found to integrate the prevention message into all areas of the community and the school program. The environment must be one that is drug free, from the classroom to the lunchroom, from the lunchroom to the locker room.

Bold Thinking and Best Efforts

All 50 states have laws requiring alcohol education, but simply fulfilling the law by adding courses in alcohol and other drug prevention or by infusing that teaching into existing courses is not adequate. What is called for is an all-out total school and community effort. Until the alcohol and drug problem is controlled, we can't expect other teen problems—pregnancy, suicide, violence, poor academic results, traffic accidents, and juvenile crime—which are often rooted in drug use, to lessen.

We need bold, imaginative thinking; and we need innovative, courageous efforts. The happiness of our children, indeed their very lives, demands it. □

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