

Role of the School in Drug Abuse Education

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Today's problem of drug abuse among young people, when viewed from the position of educators, constitutes a clear call to action. We are all aware of the current publicity being devoted to drug abuse in the schools of our country. Newspapers, magazines, and the other media abound with reports on drug misuse among America's students. Therefore, educators must become more knowledgeable about drugs so that the nation's youth will be exposed to accurate information.

Unfortunately, these reports rarely give an objective appraisal—a true picture of the situation. The press has a tendency to magnify a provocative problem out of all proportion, and this overzealous coverage seems especially evident where drug abuse is concerned. From many press reports on the subject, the casual reader would have to conclude that glue, “pep pills,” cough syrups, and LSD are as much a part of the curriculum as Western Civilization or English, as physics or chemistry.

To a degree, the high school drug abuse program has suffered from such journalistic exaggeration. But only to a degree. Careful studies have shown that drug abuse does exist in many American schools. At this time the problem appears to be confined to relatively few students, but if sensational press reports continue to be the only communication to students on the subject, the problem may not be confined much longer. Experience has shown that drug abuse is a highly contagious disease, and the kind of publicity the program has been getting—publicity that often makes drug abuse sound glamorous and exciting—can only help spread the contagion.

Those using the drugs feel it is the “in” thing.

After all, the Beatles have admitted using LSD, although they do not now. Other popular musical groups use drugs, and some have become entangled with the law. LSD, better known as “acid,” is the vortex that holds the hippie community together, and although all hippies do not use LSD, many do at one time or another. Marijuana, more commonly known as “grass,” “weed,” “marijane,” or “pot,” is easily obtainable on the campus, and many school administrators admit that marijuana smoking is an ever-growing problem. The contagion centered on college campuses also infects high school students and adults in our cities, suburbs, and small towns. No one group is immune.

Fundamentally, drug abuse is a health and social problem, not a police problem. Stopping the problem is not easy. Contrary to claims of indescribable psychedelic delights by some drug takers, most people abuse drugs to relieve anxiety. They are not pursuing pleasure—they just escape reality. The solution to the drug abuse problem must be education, not punishment. We are a pill-oriented society, but pills will not find us happiness. If any “crash” program is needed, it should call for more knowledge and understanding of the role of drugs. It should focus on the younger generations who are trying drugs today on high school and college campuses and in hippie hangouts. They have the most to lose from drug abuse.

To combat the campus drug abuse problem effectively, somebody has to talk to students about it without glamorizing it—without making it sound like the “in” thing to do. Perhaps what is needed is a balanced drug abuse education program for students which explains in an objective manner

the benefits of legitimate medical drug use and the dangers of illegitimate, harmful drug abuse. We are a drug-dependent society. At its peak is the small, perhaps diminishing, group of narcotic addicts. At its base are the millions of Americans who cannot sleep or are trying to lose weight. Their habits create no social stigma. With the exception of glue, marijuana, STP, and LSD, the drugs of the masses have accepted medicinal uses and can be found in most bathroom cabinets. The trouble lies not in the drugs but in the people.

Essentially, all drugs are harmful. Even when used medically they do their good deeds by altering the natural functions by stimulation or depression of various organs in the body. A physician carefully weighs potential harm against potential good. The nonmedical, unsupervised use of drugs holds no safeguards, only dangers.

In discussing drug abuse with representatives of Smith Kline and French Laboratories a number of suggestions were made. Among the conclusions of the discussion were these:

1. Students on high school campuses must receive a more balanced presentation of the use and abuse of drugs than they now receive;
2. Students just will not be preached to—they will not respond to being told only that drug abuse is harmful and against the law (they already know that);
3. Students respond to a balanced presentation of the facts, without overtones of authority, and then make up their own minds;
4. Students will listen more readily to other students than to faculty members on a topic of this nature; therefore, whatever educational program is developed would be more effective and generate more student enthusiasm if it were organized and conducted by students themselves.

The students responsible for any drug abuse education program must be well informed in the use and abuse of drugs themselves. Student organizations which are active, imaginative, and self-starting should be enlisted to sponsor the programs.

The difficulty for high school teachers would be to find qualified students to present the program, although the student organizations could easily sponsor the program. Results on the college campus, using well-qualified peer group members for drug abuse sessions, have been excellent, but for high schools to utilize the peer-group approach would practically be impossible. An alternative to this method which has received very positive reactions from students and teachers is to have informed college students present a program to the high

schools, dealing with the social, the physiological, and the medical implications of drug abuse. College students best qualified are probably those enrolled in professional schools such as medicine, pharmacy, or nursing.

For total effectiveness small classes (of no more than 50 students) were preferred so that questions could be freely asked with no embarrassment to the student. It has been observed, from these presentations, that both teachers and students have a great deal of misinformation concerning drugs currently receiving publicity through various news media.

Another approach is to invite in a local expert to present a lecture on drug abuse. This expert could be a physician, a pharmacist, or a member of the state or federal health agencies. The speaker must be a person of considerable experience and ability whose reputation is likely to excite the interest of the student body. He should avoid, if possible, preaching to the group but instead should be informative and should allow ample time for a question-and-answer period.

Another approach would be a workshop designed to "educate the educators" as well as to precipitate attitudinal and behavioral changes with respect to the misuse of drugs. This type of program will provide a basis for an on-going in-service program which can be expected to elevate materially the understanding of drugs and drug dependencies in the total school population. This approach is what we consider to be the most successful.

Drug education has as its objective, regardless of the level of instruction, the prevention of drug abuse. At one time, drug education was concerned only with the narcotic problem and resulting addiction. Today, drug addiction education encompasses an appreciation of the medical properties of drugs as well as the problems of drug abuse and misuse.

This is why teachers' efforts on this behalf are so vital. They have a professional duty to see that the children in their community get the right information about drugs. To the average layman, especially the impressionable youngster, drugs are exotic, mysterious substances. He may read or hear that some drugs are capable of producing pleasant effects on his mind, but he doesn't know much more. Because of the teachers' professional training, they are better able to explain to him both the good and bad properties certain drugs have, thus keeping them in their proper perspective.

Today's problem of drug abuse among young people, combined with your role as educators, constitutes a clear call to action.