

Does drug education stop drug use?

In the past many people hoped that drug education would prevent young people from ever using drugs...

...this led some people to set unrealistic aims for their drug education programmes:

We do not wish to raise unrealistic expectations of what drug education can achieve. A pragmatic and realistic approach is needed by all acknowledging that no conceivable approach will stamp out drug-taking altogether. However, there is a growing body of knowledge about the subject, and we are beginning to understand the complexities and know more about what works. Although it is a complex area and there are many reasons involved in the decision to take drugs, it is becoming clearer that drug education, based on lessons from research, delivered in the proper context and in the appropriate way has the potential to reduce drug misuse or at least to delay the onset of experimentation .

Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) Protecting Young People 1998.

It is important drug education is based on evidence about what works and what clearly does not work. Many drug education programmes have been evaluated in this country, other European countries and America. Collectively they show that:

- The impact of drug education on drug using behaviour has been shown to be limited. Drug education alone is unlikely to prevent young people from ever experimenting with drugs.
- Just Say No and shock/ scare approaches are likely to be ineffective and may even be counterproductive.
- Good quality drug education can impact on changes in specific drug using patterns and reduce the use of drugs and associated problems for young people.
- Drug education can contribute towards decreased harm and increased safety for young people, their families and communities. Drug education has been part of effective needle exchange schemes, safer dancing initiatives and drink-driving . However, the impact of more general, and particularly school-based, drug education on reducing drug-related harm (rather than whether or not people have ever used drugs) has not been measured in any studies.

Establishing the effectiveness of drug education is a complex task. Almost all evaluations of programmes have been inconclusive in terms of perceived results in reducing or preventing drug use. Where programmes have shown positive results, the benefits have been in improved knowledge, decision-making skills, and improved self-esteem. Personal and social skills, however, have not been shown in themselves to relate directly to the prevention of drug use .

DfEE Protecting Young People 1998.

- Accurate and up to date information about drugs is an important component of drug education.
- Wherever possible, programmes need to go beyond information provision to include exploration of attitudes and values and the development of personal and social skills. Life skills approaches are likely to be most effective.
- In schools and youth and community settings drug education is best addressed through a comprehensive and well-planned programme of personal, social and health education (PSHE). In most cases it is more realistic for organisations that deliver drug education to focus on educational, rather than behavioural, aims. Broad educational aims of drug education include:
 - To increase knowledge and understanding of drugs, their use and dangers, the law and helping agencies through provision of accurate and up to date information.
 - To explore a range of views, clarify attitudes and challenge stereotypes.
 - To develop a range of skills to enable young people to make their own, informed decisions about drugs whether that be take them or not. (Such skills might include assessing and avoiding risks, communicating with others, assertiveness, accessing information and advice, helping others, first aid etc.)

A useful definition of drug education is the acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills and exploration of attitudes and values which facilitate young people to be able to make informed decisions about their own, and other people s, use of drugs .

Education not propaganda

It is important to distinguish between educational approaches and propaganda, as the two often get mixed up.

Educational approach

An educational approach focuses on provision of accurate and balanced information. It accepts that there are different views

about drug use and encourages young people to explore a range of views, to develop their own opinions and also to challenge stereotypes. In terms of skill development an educational approach helps young people develop a range of relevant personal and social skills so they can make their own, informed decisions about their own, and other people's, drug use.

Propaganda

In contrast, approaches that exaggerate dangers, limit discussion, perpetuate stereotypes and tell young people what to think and do - can be more accurately described as propaganda rather than education. Propaganda discourages the development of informed decision making. It also increases the likelihood of young people feeling that drug education is irrelevant, that they are being patronised and that they are not being told the truth or given a balanced picture.

In the past many drug education programmes targeted at young people have been more in the realms of propaganda. In contrast, to be effective drug education should be firmly based on educational principles.

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