

Drug prevention in the family

Introduction

Harmful drug use by young people is a concern for most families and communities today. While most young people make a relatively smooth transition from childhood and adolescence to adulthood, some young people do engage in one or more high-risk behaviours, such as:

- unsafe sexual activity
- violence
- self-harm
- harmful drug use, including excessive use of alcohol.

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 these high-risk behaviours. This fact sheet provides an introduction to some drug prevention strategies that have developed from the research.

How common is harmful drug use among young people?

In our June 2002 report *Preventing harmful drug use*, which evaluates current research on drug prevention, we show that less than 2 per cent of Victorian students report using illegal drugs other than cannabis. The report also highlights the drugs which contribute toward the most harm among young people: tobacco, alcohol and cannabis.

Tobacco and alcohol are the two greatest contributors to preventable health and social costs in Australia. We are also beginning to see use of cannabis as an increasingly harmful influence on young Australians' development. Some studies indicate that more than 50 per cent of secondary students report having used cannabis before completing school.

Why are some young people having such serious problems with alcohol and other drugs?

Research has shown a number of causes for young people engaging in high-risk behaviours. These causes, also known as 'risk factors', are organised according to the different influences on young people's development, such as family, school, friends and others in the community, as well as individual personality characteristics. Following are some examples of the risk factors which can influence young people's drug use.

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
- family history of drug abuse

druginfo.adf.org.au 1300 85 85 84



- parents using drugs and having positive attitudes toward drug use

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

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).

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.

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. In the broader community, some of these protective factors include:

- having 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 school and community
- feeling loved and respected
- religious or spiritual connectedness.

Together, families, schools and communities can reduce the risks and increase these 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 strategies 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

Drug prevention initiatives in schools include drug education and other programs to improve or enhance students' experiences at school. Examples of such programs include mentoring and anti-bullying, breakfast clubs to ensure students start the day with a nutritious meal and homework clubs to help students experiencing difficulties in completing homework.

Drug prevention in the community

Communities support individuals, parents and families through programs that build confidence, good communication and connectedness. Community drug prevention initiatives may include programs for young



people and parents; publications (booklets, posters, advertisements etc.) that provide information; and health promotion campaigns, including sport, arts and recreation activities.

Drug prevention in the family

Families play a vital role in drug prevention. In partnership with the school and community sectors, families can prevent, delay or reduce the risks of harmful drug use in their young people. Some strategies for building on the protective factors within the family include:

- establishing clear standards and rules for behaviour
- providing opportunities to spend time with the family
- creating a sense of belonging or connectedness and opportunities to make a meaningful contribution to the family
- reducing family conflict
- enhancing communication and relationships within and outside the family
- providing positive rewards and recognition.

Help for parents

It is not easy to raise a family in today's society. Some people feel they do not have the knowledge, skills or support they need. Programs that help parents develop family management skills and provide support at home for their children's education are becoming increasingly important. These programs can help parents develop their children's competence to deal with the challenges of our modern society, including developing responsible attitudes and behaviours toward alcohol and other drugs. Parent training programs are offered through schools, community and health centres, and other organisations. They may also be of

benefit to grandparents, foster parents and other carers.

Some parenting programs offer skills training applicable to a specific situation or group; for example, for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. One example of such a program is the ABCD Parenting Young Adolescents program, which is designed to help parents understand and cope better with the challenges of early adolescence. Trained bilingual facilitators are delivering the program in English, Arabic, Macedonian, Spanish, Vietnamese and Turkish-speaking communities across Victoria. For information about this program or parenting in general, contact Parentline on tel.13 22 89. You may also wish to contact your local school or community centre regarding parent education and training programs they may offer.

Drug prevention benefits everyone

Harmful drug use by young people is a concern for everyone. Parenting programs which aim to promote healthy and happy relationships within families can be an effective drug prevention strategy. Their effectiveness can be strengthened when supported by drug prevention initiatives in schools and across the community. Parents, families, schools, communities and governments can work together to prevent harmful drug use and to improve the well-being of all members of our community.

For further information, see our website or contact the Resource Centre on 1300 85 85 84.

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