
PARENTS AND TEACHERS— Working Together to Prevent Adolescent Drug Use

By Carolyn W. Burns



In less than 15 years, drug abuse has moved from college campuses to elementary school classrooms. A recent survey revealed that one out of four fourth graders—nine- and ten-year-olds—had already felt pressure to do drugs or alcohol. Even more shocking is the fact that some children this young are already deep into drug and alcohol abuse. Teachers are

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seldom immediately aware of a child's drug use, and even parents may not discover what is going on for one to two years, since children who use drugs tend to lead a dual life-style.

An ostrichlike posture has helped further this problem. Traditionally, pastors, teachers, and parents have believed that "we don't have this problem in our area." However, no one is immune—good kids from good homes are getting involved, too!

An Effective Means of Prevention

Parent groups have proven to be one of the most effective means of preventing the use of drugs and alcohol by our young people. Working with school and community leaders, such groups have helped to change attitudes and provide a drug-free environment in

which children can achieve productive adulthood. The national network organization for these groups is the National Federation of Parents for Drug Free Youth (NFP), with headquarters in suburban Washington, D.C. When we opened our doors in February, 1980, we identified 320 parent groups in this country—today we work with more than 8,000.

Any group of parents coming together to try to influence their children to adopt drug-free attitudes and behavior could be described as a parent group. Such organizations vary in form, size, and function. However, it is precisely the uniqueness, variety, and diversity of each that constitutes the strength of the grass-roots parent movement. Almost all such organizations work to educate themselves and others about drugs,

including alcohol, and their effects; and to learn more about the drug culture that exists in today's society.

Across the nation, many parent groups are working cooperatively with local schools, youth agencies, the media, the judiciary, law enforcement, mental health professionals, and others to encourage the community at large to adopt attitudes and policies that discourage and diminish the use of drugs, including alcohol, by young people. Within their own homes, parents are working to strengthen family unity and communication and are seeking challenging and creative alternatives to the use of harmful substances by young people.

School-based Groups

School-based parent groups focus on educating parents and/or children of a particular school. Certain highly structured groups have organized the schools through homerooms so that every parent receives helpful information. Some groups have worked with schools to develop codes, guidelines, and policies, while others have found mutual advantages in school volunteer programs. Parent groups are often directly involved in school-based drug education and prevention programs. Additional types of parent groups might include:

- **Parent Peer Groups**—centered around the friendship circle of a group of children, involving sharing and communication by parents of the children in the peer group.
- **Neighborhood Groups**—similar to parent peer groups but generally include the education and involvement of an entire neighborhood area.
- **Specific Focus Group**—these groups are formed to address a specific issue, such as drug para-

phernalia or school education.

- **Parent Support Groups**—parents who are having difficulty with their own youngsters often find support and reinforcement in meeting and working with other parents who are experiencing the same problems.

- **Community-wide Groups**—frequently, parent group focus becomes so broad that it may address several different community areas, such as parent and school education, legislation, drug paraphernalia, court watching, or other concerns. This is usually accomplished through the work of several separate committees within the group. Membership is open on a community-wide basis, or several smaller groups may unite their efforts at the community level.

Establishing an effective parent group requires only a few dedicated people. It is often helpful to include in the initial planning group a few people who have had some community involvement or volunteer service experience. Depending upon the group's goals, the members may wish to include some parents who have access to other organizations or facets of the community, such as mental health, law enforcement, judiciary, educational, recreational, church, civic, business or other professional organizations. The planning committee should then consider the following steps:

How to Begin

1. Decide what type of group you are trying to form and discuss what you wish to accomplish;
2. Establish realistic long-term and short-term goals that meet existing needs. A short-term goal might be to order drug information for members or to check on educational programs in the local schools. A long-term goal might be to pass legislation prohibiting the

sale of drug paraphernalia in your county or state or to establish a community drug information resource center.

3. Gather information and resources on adolescent drug abuse, education, and prevention. Share the materials so that group members can speak out as well-informed citizens.

Knowing facts such as the following will help you become a credible source of information to your children and students:

- Marijuana has more cancer-causing chemicals than tobacco;
- When lungs are irritated by drugs, they are less able to get rid of bacteria and other foreign substances;
- In males, marijuana reduces sperm production and mobility; in females, it causes irregular menstrual cycles and egg production;
- Drugs reduce the ability to concentrate and impair such physical skills as reaction time, visual perception, and coordination.

4. Learn to recognize the signals of drug use so that you can respond to a problem quickly. (See information in Elizabeth Stern-dale's article on page 11.)

Become informed about the problem of drug abuse in your own community. Items that could be researched include incidence of use of various drugs by young people, drug-related arrests and convictions, and the merchandising of prodrug items in the community.

Use Community Resources

5. Determine what types of resources are available in the community and meet with related agencies (schools, mental health and law enforcement officials, members of the judiciary, treatment centers, et cetera) to solicit their input and cooperation.

6. Identify individuals in the

community who may be potential allies. If you plan to request their involvement, ask a member who knows them well to make a personal appeal.

7. If a community-wide campaign is planned, meet with members of the local media (newspaper, radio, television) to inform them of your goals and program and request their assistance and cooperation.

Working Together

Parents and schools can work together effectively to promote prevention. Each must strengthen the efforts of the other if we are to successfully help our children resist the widespread and intense pressure to do drugs in today's society. Parent group leaders can help you plan drug education and prevention programs for the parents of your students. Telephone reminders can be an effective way to increase meeting attendance.

In addition, schools should develop a clear no-drug policy and K-12 prevention education programs for students that include some parent participation.

Many schools have formed drug-free student groups, and the National Federation of Parents for Drug Free Youth has an on-site two-day educational program for selected high-school students called "REACH America" (Responsible, Educated Adolescents Can Help America). Students who take our training course are encouraged to start drug-free youth groups in their own schools and to help give drug prevention education to elementary- and middle-school students, thus providing a positive role model in the process.

Teachers and parents need to be aware that some of the things they do make it easy for young people to use mood-altering chemicals. The following are examples of

enabling behaviors used by some adults that *help and encourage kids to use drugs*.

1. They overhear plans concerning drugs or alcohol but pretend not to have heard.

Effective response: The adult should confront the young person immediately and tell him or her that that kind of talk and behavior is inappropriate. In addition, the adult should express concern about the young person.

2. Adults smell alcohol or marijuana but do nothing.

Appropriate action: When an adult rationalizes and discounts such knowledge or observation, young people may see the adult's failure to confront them as an indication that the grown-up doesn't care what they do.

3. Parents and teachers don't talk about chemical-abuse incidents.

Appropriate action: Adults need to overcome their discomfort about discussing alcohol and drugs. This does not mean just sitting youngsters down for one big talk, assuming that one has thereby been absolved of any further responsibility!

Adults also tend to participate in self-deception and denial, saying such things as: "We don't have a problem in our [school, home, community]." "My children are well brought up; they wouldn't do anything like that." "If a problem exists in my family, it must indicate that I am to fault, that I am a bad parent. Therefore, to keep from being embarrassed, I will ignore the problem." Or worse yet, the hopeless refrain, "If kids are going to get into drugs, they will. It's no use trying to overcome peer pressure and media hype. They all do it. It's probably just a stage all kids go through."

Ignoring the problem will *not* make it go away. Chemical-abuse

incidents that happen in your community are relevant and meaningful to everyone, and young people and adults can learn good lessons by discussing them. In addition, such conversations help keep open the channels of communication between concerned adults and adolescents.

4. Parents and teachers often fail to consistently enforce rules.

Appropriate action: Adults should be firm, setting limits and sticking with them. They should explain the reasons for these rules and expect adherence.

5. Adults themselves model inappropriate use of drugs and alcohol.

Appropriate action: Adults should at all times set a good example for young people in their use of over-the-counter and prescription drugs, as well as abstinence from caffeine, alcohol, tobacco, and other harmful substances. They should themselves display, through healthful living, their respect for the human body as God's temple.

For more information on how to start a parent group in your school, call the NFP at their toll-free number 1-800-554-KIDS, or write us at 8730 Georgia Avenue, Suite 200, Silver Spring, MD 20910. We have a comprehensive Parent/Community Task Force Manual that may be ordered for \$5. NFP is a membership organization that publishes a quarterly newsletter and a legislative update to help members keep abreast of the latest effective pharmacological prevention efforts, as well as legislation on this issue.

We can win this war on drugs only by developing strong programs at the local and national level. Our young people need the support and help of caring adults in making a commitment to stay drug-free! □