

THIS IS NOT A PHASE

A HARM REDUCTION NEWSLETTER

BACK TO SCHOOL

THIS ISSUE WILL FOCUS ON
CURRENT AND SUGGESTED
APPROACHES TO DRUG
EDUCATION



IT'S TIME TO ABANDON ABSTINENCE

"This is your brain. These are drugs. This is your brain on drugs." Cue image of brain-eggs cracking into a frying pan. Many of us remember these advertisements from childhood. However, these tactics have gone from scary to laughable. When youth laugh at this kind of scare tactic, the laughter comes not only from the ironic awareness that anti-drug education clearly does not work for them, but from the knowledge of how incredibly sensationalized and counterproductive it is in general.

WHAT WORKS IN DRUG EDUCATION

There are countless articles and research studies which evidence the ineffectiveness of abstinence approaches to school drug education. Therefore, similar to recent initiatives within sexual health education, there is a need for education models to shift towards harm reduction.

The following suggestions have been adapted from various studies and reports conducted on effective approaches to school drug education;

ITS TIME TO ABANDON ABSTINENCE

Often, people who use drugs talk about how, after being bombarded by frightening images of the worst possible effects of drug use, those internalized messages would actually backfire and have the exact opposite effect of their intention when trying drugs for the first time. When none of the doomsday predictions come true after the first few times, youth are left questioning the accuracy of all of the narratives they'd been given about drugs—including ones about actual potential dangers.

The only narratives about drug use offered in an educational context are negative and completely over-the-top. When these narratives fail to prevent use, they're promptly rejected as incongruent with the actual, real experience of being high. A lot of people are underwhelmed, even, after all the drama and hype around illegal drugs. (Fun fact: Your odds of seeing flying purple elephants on a starter dose of magic mushrooms are pretty low.)

Without being given any sort of accurate, balanced information about drugs, safe use or harm reduction, experimenters are left to find out for themselves about harms and benefits, relying on their peers and on their own process of trial-and-error to discover a more rounded picture of the world of psychoactive substances. And since not everyone knows about accurate online sources, you can imagine what kind of preventable things can happen when 'figuring it out as you go along' is how it's done.

This trial-and-error process often causes damages that could have been easily avoided had individuals had access to balanced information about drugs in the first place with attention paid to all aspects of drugs' place in human life: good, bad and neutral. Scare tactics might prevent some teenagers from trying psychoactive substances, but they leave those who do end up trying them woefully unprepared.

Currently, in our culture, drugs are an unavoidable part of life. The odds are extremely good that you're under the influence of a drug right now. My guess would be caffeine, especially if it's morning when you're reading this. Maybe it's the evening, and you were sipping a glass of wine as you scrolled around Facebook and saw this post. Only you know what's in your medicine cabinet. Drugs are such a normal part of life that we barely even remember the fact that most of us take them all the time. Ignoring this fact is either a significant oversight in health education, or a conscious choice to leave those "deviant experimenters" who are curious about drugs to fend for themselves.

This article was adapted from the blog Raving Anthropology by Hilary Agro

EDUCATION THAT WORKS

- Establish drug education outcomes that are appropriate to the audience and contribute to the overall goal of minimizing harms associated with substance use.
Focus on reducing harm, rather than reducing use.
- Promote a safe, supportive and inclusive environment as part of seeking to prevent harms associated with substance use.
A nonjudgmental environment is protective for young people against a range of risks associated with drug use, such as stigmatization, discrimination, and social isolation.
- Promote collaborative relationships between students, staff, families and the broader community in the implementation of drug education.
Strong relationships with families, agencies and the broader community can enhance ones' sense of connectedness, and support access to relevant services.
- Acknowledge that a range of social factors impact individual well-being and influence choices about drug use.
Programs that recognize the complexity of issues that may have an impact on students' drug use are in a better position to provide relevant drug education.
- Dispel myths about legal versus illegal drugs.
Discuss the legal risks associated with illicit drug use and challenge misconceptions about legality and safety.
- Provide accurate information and meaningful learning activities (Don't beat around the bush).
Drug education is most effective when individuals are provided with ALL of the information i.e. both the benefits of substance use and potential risks
- Encourage young people to identify potential choices and options suited for a range of possible situations associated with drug use.
Rather than being told how to act or behave, effective drug education should foster critical thinking and encourage young people to make informed choices.



Overview and Summary of the Principles for School Drug Education published by the Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004. .
Beck, J. (1998). 100 years of "just say no" versus "just say know" reevaluating drug education goals for the coming century. Evaluation Review, 22(1), 15-45.