

Drug education isn't rocket science

Drug epidemic

The British Medical Association has recently published a report describing alcohol abuse as a UK-wide epidemic. The Government has issued a new 10-year drug strategy and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has been reviewing the effectiveness of drug education. Drugs, and especially alcohol, are high on the public agenda and constantly in the news.

Hope UK is a Christian drug education charity which enables young people to make drug-free choices. The principal means of achieving this is to train voluntary drug educators to provide drug awareness and training sessions throughout the UK. Over 200 Christians have completed or are completing Hope UK's 120-hour Open College Network accredited training course. Becoming a drug educator is not a soft option – it takes a high level of commitment and a decision to adopt a lifestyle free from the social use of drugs, including alcohol and tobacco.

Hope for the future

Hope UK has been around since 1847 when it started life as the Band of Hope. One of the founders, Ann Jane Carlile, was reputed to have



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children and young people are increasingly being affected by alcohol

said that the children she met during a mission in Leeds were 'a happy band' and represented the 'hope for the future'. Perhaps she had put her finger on something that all of us are working towards today – to ensure that children enjoy life, live it to the full and become our 'hope for the future'.

Nineteenth century drug education consisted of Magic Lantern slideshows and, at the turn of the twentieth century, the Band of Hope employed 50 schools lecturers to travel the country. Drug education was never rocket science. It was, is, and probably always will be about positive relationships and positive messages. This historical basis applies just as much to drug education today. As Christians, they wanted to see children and young people living healthy lives, looking after themselves as part of God's creation and being fit for God's service. They wanted to see them positively influence others for good, taking action to avoid causing other people to stumble (Romans 14:21).

A visitor from the nineteenth century would see disturbing parallels with the social situation today. Binge drinking is a serious problem, and children and young people are increasingly being affected by alcohol. Educators of the past might be bemused by the range of substances available today and the development of the drink trade but, in essence, there would still be the same paradox: substances taken for pleasure often result in pain.

Lifeskills

Hope UK includes alcohol and tobacco use within its drug education. Drugs may be defined by one





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word but different substances provide different effects; some are stimulants, some depressants, some cause hallucinations and some, of course, are medicines. People use them for many different reasons: as an escape from unhappiness; as a part of risk-taking behaviour; to alleviate boredom; or to 'fit in' with their peers.

There is a great deal of good advice available about how to carry out drug education which follows a lifeskills approach. It follows the same 'rules' as other approaches to educational topics. Quite simply, good drug education uses what we already know about good parenting, good youth work or good teaching. Yet the response to this good advice has been patchy at best and not only in schools. People everywhere are driven by crisis and it is sometimes difficult to give priority to preventing a problem which may not yet exist.

Proof

It is very difficult to prove that drug education prevents drug-related harm. How can you measure the reasons why an individual decides not to use drugs? The research that has been undertaken has often been limited to one intervention for a short period of time, and therefore cannot take into account the myriad of influences that play upon us all. The recent Blueprint project, funded by central Government, was an attempt to offer a more intensive and long-term approach to drug education in

schools (and with parents). It will be interesting to see what the research has turned up when it reports later this year.

There is a lack of understanding that drug education, when done well, is a process that applies throughout a young person's life. At Hope UK, we still receive invitations to carry out just one drug session, seemingly set in isolation. A decade or so ago this was common practice, and even now not everyone accepts that a holistic lifeskills approach, that is cross-curricular and applied consistently throughout a school career, is most effective.

There has also been a lack of clear objectives with one pragmatic approach suggesting that, because many people are going to use drugs, we might as well show them how to use them safely. Hope UK doesn't buy into this approach; our vision is to enable and empower young people to make drug-free choices. Of course, there will always be people who use substances for pleasure and find that this can turn to pain, either for themselves or those around them. Yet, at heart, prevention is a positive concept which seeks to enable people to live their lives to the full.

The debate

Part of the current debate revolves around two seemingly contradictory philosophical viewpoints: 'civil liberties' and 'social responsibility'.

Proponents of civil liberties argue that individuals should have the right to do whatever they want as long as they don't break the law of the land, or inhibit another person's legal right to do whatever they want. They usually argue that fewer laws mean greater liberty. Libertarians believe legalising illegal drugs increases freedom and choice. They go on to point out that sometimes people engage in illicit activity precisely because it is taboo. If heroin was legal, they argue, people might actually be less inclined to use it in the first place.

Those who favour social responsibility argue that individuals have a moral responsibility to consider how their own choices and actions affect the lives of others. They contend that individuals should weigh up the direct and indirect social and economic ramifications of, say, drinking alcohol. Advocates of social responsibility point out the power of peer influence or role modelling. Social responsibility works on a number of levels. National Government uses laws, taxes, subsidies

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and publicity campaigns to discourage irresponsible behaviour and encourage responsible behaviour. Individuals and organisations like Hope UK also have a role to play.

Offering alternatives

Drug education has sometimes had a bad press because of the vested interests involved. For a start, our own habits and prejudices influence how we feel about something. For example, if we drink socially we may be less inclined to criticise alcohol even though many more people in the UK are hurt or killed by alcohol than all the illegal drugs added together. Within church circles, the issue of alcohol tends to build barriers rather than bridges. As Christians, we need to make an effort to understand what is going on in our society so we can work together, whatever our personal attitude, to help those who are hurting.

Alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs are one area where it makes perfect sense for a school to work with the community. Working with local community groups could offer an innovative way forward. For example, a church might run a parental drug awareness session in school premises or vice versa. Hope UK's educators are trained to do this and, in conjunction with Care for the Family's 'Drug Proof Your Kids' programme (www.dpyk.org.uk), offer a range of drug awareness options to suit most situations.

If you are in a school where the public come in on a frequent basis – either for school functions or leisure activities – why not make sure that there

More information

For ideas and information relating to drug education, see the Hope UK website (www.hopeuk.org) as well as the 'thirst for life' campaign site (www.thirstforlife.org) which focuses on alcohol issues.

Drug information can also be obtained from:



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are plenty of good alcohol-free drinks available? Focusing on the positive, and offering alternatives, is important.

Working with Hope UK

It's fascinating to be involved at the universal end of drug education where, as our strap-line says, Hope UK enables young people to make drug-free choices. Even with this description, people imagine that, if you are working with alcohol, tobacco or illegal drugs, then you must be dealing with problems. Focusing on living life to the full as God intended (John 10:10) offers a different perspective. Helping young people to realise how special they are is a gift that they can take with them throughout their lives.

Hope UK's main focus is on working with churches and other voluntary groups, partly because its voluntary drug educators are available mainly during the evening and at weekends. Hope UK educators come from all walks of life and many are able to draw upon the knowledge and experience they bring with them from their 'day jobs'.

At the moment, Hope UK is reaching 50,000 children and young people each year. Our aim is to reach 500,000 a year by the end of 2011, which means that we need to have 800 active educators throughout the United Kingdom. We want to serve the entire community, including those in formal and informal education. With this in mind, I should like to invite *ACT Now* readers to consider applying to become a Hope UK voluntary drug educator. The training is provided free of charge. Christian teaching assistants, Christian teachers and Christian rocket scientists welcome!

■ George Ruston

Our aim is to reach 500,000 a year by the end of 2011

Leave the crowd control behind – find a really rewarding alternative!

By teaching missionaries' children, YOU can make a significant contribution to world evangelisation.

Teachers of all subjects, from primary to A level, are required for the children of missionaries overseas. TEFL and Special Needs are warmly welcomed.

Applicants need to be committed Christians, ready to live out and share their faith in a cross-cultural context. Staff are expected to trust God to provide their needs. (A basic allowance is sometimes given.)

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