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AUTHOR Frank, Peter R.
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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, drug abuse education in the public schools has been approached through the use of scare tactics and scientific data. This document suggests that the old methods are not workable, and therefore attention should be directed toward helping the child develop a good self-concept and teaching decision-making skills. In the You and Your Decisions project, written audiovisual and workshop materials were developed to help parents and teachers create an environment in which a child can learn about the decision-making process. An inservice training program was developed to motivate the teacher to provide a decision-making atmosphere in the classroom. Student materials emphasized the importance of a good self-concept and how it applies to the decision-making process. The parent component stressed the importance of the child's right to make certain decisions which affect him in his family situation. Good decision-making skills were viewed as helpful not only in preventing drug abuse, but in helping children deal more effectively with other temptations and frustrations in life. (Author/PC)

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AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO DRUG EDUCATION

by

PETER R. FRANK, Ph.D.

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In some ways the title of this paper is a misrepresentation. It probably conjures up for many people a view of drug abuse education, of the type they have been used to seeing for so many years. I would say at the outset that that form of drug abuse education is useless. I am essentially speaking of two approaches to drug abuse education which have traditionally been used in attempting to deal with the problem.

The first and oldest approach is the use of scare tactics. This essentially developed out of the ageless prohibitionist approach to alcohol; and the fire and brimstone attack on the "demon rum" or whatever euphemism was currently in vogue. Many I am sure can still remember the traumatic presentations in the classroom where the teacher dropped a hapless worm into a beaker of alcohol and the class watched in horror and rapt attention as the poor creature shriveled up into a shapeless ball of pulp. The teacher would then triumphantly suggest to the class that that is what happened to your brain if you drank alcohol. For awhile that might have made an impression but ultimately the brighter students at least would discover that that in fact does not happen to your brain; otherwise the brains of their parents, older friends, or whatever, would all be in

that sorry state. The only valid message that one could derive from that demonstration was that if one is a worm one shouldn't go swimming in a beaker of alcohol.

The same approach was used in relation to other drugs, particularly marijuana. The late unlamented Harry Anslinger (former commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics) issued all kinds of pamphlets, some of them still in use, which suggested that marijuana was the root of all of the world's sordid acts of violence and depravity. There again the end result was that people, and particularly young people, began to realize that this was not so and that, in fact, marijuana was a depressant which tended to make people lethargic and unproductive. So those who preached the gospel according to Anslinger lost whatever credibility they might have had and the youth subculture was quick to use the inconsistencies which were so freely expounded in relation to marijuana to tarnish the credibility of adults in relation to their statements on all drugs.

The other traditional approach involves giving "honest scientific" information about drugs. Admittedly when I first started working with drug abuse education I was a proponent of that. I felt that while certainly scare tactics wouldn't work and I was enough of a psychologist and an observer to realize this, giving youngsters good, solid information about drugs, their harmful effects, symptoms, the names, what they looked like, what they were called in the subculture, and so forth, that would be a workable approach. The more progressive people in the field thought likewise and so today most drug education or drug abuse education programs are essentially programs of information. Despite the switch to this type of drug

education, drug abuse is still a very serious problem and alcohol, probably the worst drug of all, is rapidly increasing in usage among young people and so obviously something is wrong. Obviously the teacher who laboriously memorizes the pharmacology of mood changing drugs and tries to transmit this to the youngsters is failing; obviously the uniformed policeman who comes into the school auditorium with his display case of brightly colored imitation pills and the impressive paraphernalia of spoons and syringes, broken glass, roaches, and clips, is not succeeding -- otherwise we would not have a drug problem today.

As I became more and more involved with the drug abuse phenomenon and as I saw more and more evidence that these approaches were not working, it became apparent to me as it has to a few other enlightened souls that drug abuse is a symptom -- a symptom of many, many underlying causes and if one wished to wax philosophical, one could discuss at great length the social and psychological phenomena of our times which contribute to the drug problem. We could talk at length about the uncertainty of life in the latter part of the 20th century, we could talk about the influence of instant communication, we could talk about the breakdown of the family and the transference of a basically rural lifestyle exemplified by the extended family to an urban lifestyle, the core family unit and the tremendous pressures inherent in crowded technologically oriented living.

It is important for us to recognize that we live in a drug ridden, drug saturated, drug obsessed society. Almost from the moment we pop out of the birth canal and are placed in front of a television set in the maternity room we are inculcated with the idea that everytime we have a pain, a problem, we

should pop a pill, take a drink, or smoke a cigarette, particularly one which is one inch longer than another and therefore will kill us presumably two years earlier.

It is my contention that approaching drug education in the ways that we have mentioned through the time honored techniques of education just doesn't work. Drug use and abuse are symptomatic of underlying causes as we have said before, and, therefore, must be dealt with in a different way. They cannot be dealt with as one deals with the teaching of the Pythagorean theorem or the past-pluperfect of Latin verbs. If we were miraculously to eliminate all drugs of abuse from the market today tomorrow there would be another batch -- at least as bountiful as the first, probably more varietal. So we cannot deal with drug abuse by either ignoring it or wishing it away. It will continue to be with us, to be a way of life for many, and a temptation for most.

What we must do is to help our youngsters live in a drug-oriented society and make choices that are going to be best for them. A good drug abuse program, therefore, is not a drug abuse program at all but a program which teaches decision making. We must help youngsters to make meaningful decisions about their lives and that includes whether to take drugs or not. Before I go into the philosophy and sequence of decision making as a learning concept, I would like to discuss briefly the lack of decision making characteristics in the traditional upbringing of a child, both at home and at school.

When a baby is born it has among its many instinctive characteristics the desire to make decisions. It wants to do things when it wants to, how it wants to. From the moment we grab something out of its hand, from the

moment we sit it on the potty when we want and not when it wants, where it wants, from that moment we insidiously, calculatedly, begin to destroy the inherent decision making drives that the child has. This does not suggest that children should be denied direction for socially acceptable behavior or allowed to function without guidance in situations beyond their maturity level. What it does suggest is that we should attempt wherever reasonably possible to allow children to make decisions which affect them directly so as to encourage rather than weaken their natural tendency to self-assertion. However, we generally don't do that.

Parents, "good parents" particularly, are very protective of their child: They know what is in his best interests at all times and endeavor to protect him from unnecessary hardships and disappointments. So the "father knows best," "mother knows best," syndrome becomes firmly established. The "not so good parent" also tends to make all the decisions for the youngster simply because it is time saving and expedient. And in fact the decision of the parents -- particularly in the child's early life -- may very well be best for the child. And the child recognizes this and so while at first he rebels against the usurpation of his decision making rights, it becomes quite comfortable in accepting the authority figure of the parents and relying upon their good judgment for everything he has to do. And as the child grows older and goes out of the home to the school environment, this syndrome is usually, if not always, repeated by the teacher. So the child learns to suppress independence and decision making needs, and to accept the parent and teacher as the deciders of his destiny.

Two things tend to happen when the child has lost his decision making desire. Firstly, if the results of the decision which are made for the child are negative

the child feels no responsibility for the consequences because the decision was not made by him but for him. Secondly, the child does not have the ability to act when the parent or the teacher are not around to make decisions for him. In this day and age crucial issues -- issues which may affect the child for the rest of his life -- come up earlier and earlier in his life. These may very well involve the taking of drugs. All too often the child who has never been allowed to make a decision for himself is pushed into a decision by peer group pressure and the need to be liked. Indecision resulting in a consequence (which it always does) is a form of decision in itself -- but a very poor one. It is made by circumstances and not by the individual. Many adults make decisions that way by default; others through group pressure or pressure by strong-willed individuals. In any case, their destinies are not of their own making. Granted, some adults learn how to make good decisions on their own but it surely is a very painful and often traumatic learning experience. How much better it is if children learn to make decisions early in their lives, in the security of their own homes and in the early years of their schooling with loving adults able to help and make them feel secure.

I submit that decision making is something that can be learned and practiced. From the very earliest moments of a child's interrelationship with his environment he can be allowed to make decisions which are appropriate for his level of maturity and for the circumstances. Instead of a home where the parent makes the decision for the family at all times, an environment can be developed where all members of the family are able to function in a democratic decision making fashion, where the children are given alternatives and allowed to choose from these alternatives and where they are required to consider the

ramifications of the decisions that they make and accept the consequences.

Of course, in order for a child to be able to make decisions he must first of all have the prerequisite that is inherent in all effective decision making -- a sense of self-worth. In order for the child to feel good about himself, there must be a positive atmosphere within the family. All too often in our society we tend to reinforce negative behavior and accept positive behavior as expected. Very often also in a family where there is more than one child there is a tendency to compare. If the first child happens to be particularly bright or clever, the other children in the family may be compared with him. The performance of the one child is held up as a yardstick for the others to follow and if they do not achieve that standard it is made clear to them that they have failed. Often the parent will have some arbitrary expectation which the child must achieve. If he does then that is accepted as the norm. If he does not he is made to understand that he has failed. The failure syndrome is an insidious one and has far reaching consequences. If a child is identified over and over again as a failure he will ultimately become one and justify the self-fulfilling prophecy. Within the school the child's failure syndrome may be reinforced. Comparison with classmates and the grading system very quickly establish the child in the hierarchy of quality and expectation and the vicious cycle continues.

So obviously one of the prerequisites of teaching effective decision making is helping the youngster to feel positive about himself and to develop a good self-concept. Positive constructive behavior on the part of the child should be recognized and lauded and reaction to negative behavior de-emphasized. The very

young child wherever possible should be made to compete not with the outside world and his peers but with himself.

In the process of helping the child to make decisions a parent must accept the fact that mistakes will occur. These mistakes should become the basis of a positive learning situation and recognition given to the attempt and not only the outcome. The child should not be made to feel that failure results in rejection -- otherwise he will be reluctant to make further decisions.

Let us look for a moment at the total gestalt of the decision making process. From the very beginning of his existence the child is bombarded with a multitude of external influences. Parental, peer group, church, the influence of his environment, heredity. All of these vie with each other for his attention. The tendency of the child is to accept those which have immediate value to him. If he is striving for recognition in his own peer group it will be the peer group that carries the most weight and influence. It will be the individual who represents the peer group, the individual who represents success at that particular moment who will have the child's ear. So all other influences tend to be minimized. Immediate gratification, instantaneous success or pleasure, become the most important criteria. Delayed gratification or the consequences in the future are not considered.

However, if we teach the child to evaluate all of the inputs equally and consider the consequences of his choice after thinking through the alternatives, then he will develop a decision making system which is going to have much more logical and intelligent outcomes. The child must learn to ask the question whether a particular influence is one that benefits him and his relationship with others or, in fact, is a selfish need of the individual or the group that is attempting to influence him.

Obviously the more decisions that a child makes in this manner the easier the process of decision making becomes and the more likely he will make decisions which are beneficial for him.

In this way I believe the child develops a value system. We consistently hear adults; teachers, parents bemoaning the fact that the young do not have a value system. Both the left wing radical and the John Birchler will agree on that point. Unfortunately, in the same breath, they will attempt to tell you exactly what that value system should be. Of course we know that when something external is imposed upon a child or anyone for that matter the tendency is for him to reject it outright, or at best to accept it on a superficial level only with no real commitment. However, when he has learned to make decisions and follow the logical sequence that decision making implies he will develop his own value system which emanates from the right decisions that he has made -- decisions which prove themselves to be effective for himself and for his interrelationship with his environment. The value system which he develops in this way is not only his personal value system but one which is compatible with the society in which he lives. And as the child develops his own value system that value system will help to influence the decisions that he makes and a cycle of independent and rational human behavior will have been developed.

THE PROJECT

In the You and Your Decisions project, we have attempted to develop materials which help the significant adults in the child's life to create for the youngster an environment in which he can learn the decision making process,

experiment with it, and ultimately use it effectively. There are three essential target populations in the project. The youngster himself, the teacher, and the parent. Another component directed to the community essentially serves as an informational tool. The program combines written materials, audio visual materials and workshop formats.

For the teacher there is an extensive inservice program which is followed by a film which motivates the teacher to experiment in the classroom in a decision making atmosphere. She is given an extensive guide which not only reinforces the ideas inherent in the film but also presents her with a large number of classroom activities which she can use to help the youngster develop his decision making skills. There are basically two kinds of approaches which the teacher is encouraged to use. The first provides reasonable real life decisions for the youngsters to make, including choices in his academic program and in his day-to-day classroom routine. The second suggests artificial decision making choices involving games, role-playing, etc. There is a strong emphasis placed in the materials on the ideas that consequences must be dealt with openly while failure should serve as a positive learning experience. Further, clear alternatives must be presented so the youngster in fact does have choices.

The student materials at this particular stage of the project are limited to the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades but it is hoped that they will be extended to pre-kindergarten on the one hand and twelfth on the other. They include a motivational film to emphasize to the youngster the importance of a good self-concept, the significance of self-worth, and the stages of decision making

as it applies to them. These ideas are incorporated into a series of pamphlets and activities. The pamphlets deal in very readable fashion with psychological concepts such as self-image, values, etc. These are reinforced in a comic book which follows the activities of a girl in her daily routine. A series of games which the youngster can play with either his parents or other children requires decision making and the involvement of personal values. The package will ultimately include a number of film strips which the youngster will be able to view on an individual basis at any time during the period when the materials are available in the school.

The parent component is very similar to that of the teacher except that it is oriented to the home environment. The film reinforces the importance of the parent as the prime influence in the early life of the youngster. It stresses the importance of allowing the child to function as an emancipated member of the family with the right to make certain reasonable decisions which affect him directly in his relationship to the other family members. It also outlines to the parent the relationship of good decision making to a personal value system which is acceptable in the social environment in which the child finds himself.

The guide for the parent re-emphasizes the highlights of the film and also presents her with a variety of activities which she can initiate with the child and which interface with activities in the school.

The cooperation of parent and teacher is most important. Generally, school programs which require parental involvement have failed because of the difficulty of persuading parents of the importance of participation. Many programs

which structurally involve the parent are presented in such a way that the latter soon loses interest and her participation is pro forma rather than real.

This is not true in this case. The importance of the adult is directly in relationship to her influence on the child's life so the importance of the parent's role is self-evident.

I see this approach to be of far greater scope than a program which deals solely with drug abuse or any other single phenomenon of our phrenetic society. It essentially deviates from the traditional authoritarian and paternalistic educational program and demands a new perspective on the part of the teacher (and of course the parent) toward the education of the child.

However, if parents and teachers involve children in the decisions that affect their lives they will not only help them to deal more effectively with a multitude of temptations and frustrations which crowd willy-nilly upon them but, at the same time, will help to develop a human being who is more self-sufficient, more aware, and more competent to lead a full, productive and happy life.