

Drug Education

Understanding evidence based approaches to alcohol and drug education

Evidence-based approaches to drug education

It is important that the teachers leading the student involvement in educating peers and community members about drugs are familiar with evidence-based approaches to drug education. Teachers should be well informed about their state, territory or system drug education programmes and initiatives. In addition, these teachers must be able to communicate the following key messages to student leaders and facilitators.

Message 1: Using an evidence-based approach

Many research studies have investigated whether drug education programmes reduce the likelihood of young people using drugs. This research indicated that whilst some education programmes have demonstrated a positive effect in preventing harmful drug use, others seem to make no difference, and others again have been associated with an increased likelihood of young people using drugs. We need to be guided by these studies and make sure our efforts to have students make safe choices are not producing the wrong results.

This is called taking an evidence-based approach. Some of the key messages about how to make drug education effective are below. They should be kept in mind when choosing or modifying activities.

Message 2: Knowledge is not enough

Having accurate knowledge about drugs and their effects is important but it is not enough to keep people from taking risks with drugs. We need also to consider the pressures and influences that can affect people's choices and give people opportunities to plan and develop the skills they need to help them handle different decisions and pressures.

Message 3: Provide accurate information

Research shows that young people want accurate information in relation to drugs. Sometimes scare tactics, which aim to highlight the danger associated with an activity, can also make the activity seem more attractive – a way to rebel or to add excitement to life. Accurate information is essential. Good education leads to people thinking through their choices.

Message 4: Watch you don't normalise or glamorise risky behaviours

It is important not to create the impression that most young people use drugs. This can happen if we talk about drug use as if we assume everyone is doing it. This assumption can put pressure on people to take up such activities in order to fit what they perceive to be a norm. Examine the statistics – particularly those relating to 'regular use'. They show that 83.5% of 16-17 year olds have never smoked cigarettes; 75% of 12-19 year olds have never tried cannabis and 19.4% of 16-17 year olds have not had a full serve of alcohol. 29% of 14-19 years group abstain from alcohol and 31.5% drink at low levels of risk for short term harm. Around 11% of 14-19 year olds drink at high risk levels in relation to short term harms. Be mindful of this when preparing dramatic scenarios. Avoid casting a disproportionate number of the characters as risk-takers. Make sure you don't portray the risk takers as the most glamorous or interesting characters.

Using ex-users as guest speakers can also glamorise high-risk behaviour. An ex-user's testimonial can inadvertently send the message – 'I took all those risks, but look – I survived, and now I warrant special attention.'

Message 5: Think about safety

Young people need to be asked to look at what the risks or harms of certain behaviours may be, and to think about and plan for how best to make safe choices.

Message 6: Strategies have to match the person and the circumstances

It is important to develop the skills and strategies needed to both prevent and reduce any harm that has occurred as a result of someone's drug use behaviour. When developing strategies it is best to attune them to the circumstances, people and contexts that are likely to occur.

Message 7: Interactive strategies work best

It is best to use activities that actively engage and involve the participants. They need to be mixing, talking, thinking and enjoying themselves.

Message 8: Tailor the programme to suit the needs and interests of the target audience

In selecting the activities for a particular group it is important to consider carefully their needs and interests. This includes choosing activities that are suitable for the age and developmental stage of the target group of young people. It also means working with sensitivity to the cultural and religious beliefs of those in the community. Avoid using scenarios designed for teenagers when working with younger primary students.

Reference

Cahill, H., Murphy, B., Kane, C. (2005) L.E.A.D, Student Participatory Approaches, Leading Education About Drugs, Support Materials for School Drug Education Forums. Australian Youth Research Centre, The University of Melbourne