

How are we handling drug abuse?

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Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs
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1. Introduction

Focus on the Family[®] Australia launched a parent-focused, drug education, prevention and early intervention program in March 1999. This program is called *How to Drug Proof Your Kids*, and was created in response to a growing demand by parents for resources and assistance in knowing what they can do to help steer their children away from the harmful use of drugs. As a non-profit, non-government, non-denominational organisation responding to around 40,000 requests for assistance from parents, we are concerned that parents for too long have been isolated from playing an important role in reducing drug abuse in our society.

Among the most important developments in drug abuse prevention theory in recent years, resulting from applied empirical research, has been a focus on reducing *risk factors* and strengthening *protective factors*. It recognises that the more *risk factors* children experience, the more likely they are to experience drug abuse and associated problems. Research has also shown that the more the risks in a child's life can be reduced, the less vulnerability that child will have to subsequent health and social problems (Hawkins, Catalano & Miller, 1992).

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However, a child's exposure to a significant number of *risk factors* does not necessarily mean the harmful use of drugs or other problem behaviours will automatically follow. One reason for this is the presence of *protective factors*. These balance and buffer risk factors. Risk and protective factors exist at every level at which an individual interacts with society. Following on from this, there is a significant body of international research that demonstrates the important role parents have in helping their children make good choices concerning risk-taking behaviours that are a normal part of adolescence. It also shows that where there is a high level of parental connectedness with their children, children are less likely to engage in the harmful use of drugs. This research shows that educational approaches targeting the family (parents and children) and school-based approaches involving parents or complimenting student-focused curricula with parent-focused curricula can be effective in preventing adolescent drug abuse (Dishion, Andrews, Kavanagh & Soberman, 1996; Hawkins, Catalano & Associates, 1992; Kumpfer, Molgaard & Spoth, 1996; Pentz, 1995; and Walter, Vaughn & Wynder, 1989).

For this reason, and for the purpose of reducing family breakdown, associated crime, health risks and the overall economic cost of drug abuse on society, Focus on the Family[®] Australia believes there is a greater need for resources to be devoted to preventative strategies that have a particular emphasis on *protective factors* that strengthen a child's home (family domain). Although there is a need for more resources to assist with treatment, rehabilitation and education, many organisations that work with families are concerned that in practice, prevention resources are far outweighed.

2. Established Need for Prevention Programs that are Parent-Focused

In the light of findings from the above research and the escalating drug problem in Australia, there is a great need to provide programs to parents that address these *protective factors*. If a stable family unit and high level of parent connectedness have been recognised as key protective factors, then there is a need to provide programs in Australia with this particular emphasis. To date in Australia, drug education in has primarily focused on reducing risk factors for the harmful use of drugs by young people. Focus on the Family[®] Australia has constantly had to respond to criticism from drug educators and schoolteachers that argue against programs that engage parents in favour of maintaining the current approach that

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primarily targets youth in schools. However, the increasing levels of drug use among young people would seem to indicate that this approach on its own is inadequate and unsuccessful in changing attitudes and behaviour.

There is the need for programs to incorporate a multifaceted approach whereby *risk factors* and *protective factors* are addressed because they are present in the various life domains in which social interactions occur. These domains include:

- Individual (biological and psychological dispositions, attitudes, values, knowledge, skills, problem behaviour)
- Peers (norms, activities)
- Family (function, management, bonding).
- School (bonding, climate, policy, performance)
- Community (bonding, norms, resources, awareness/mobilisation)
- Society/environment (norms, policy)

Each of these life domains stated above never remain static, and therefore, any approach seeking to address at least one of these domains must recognise such changes. Focus on the Family[®] Australia believe that parent-focused education (family domain) is important for the following reasons:

- I) Research confirms the importance of addressing the family domain as negative behaviour can predict adolescent substance abuse (Jones & Houts, 1992; Jackson, Henriksen, Dickinson & Levine, 1997)
- II) Low bonding between parents and children is consistently associated with risk for substance abuse (Brook, Brook, Gordon, Whiteman & Cohen, 1990; Fletcher & Jeffries, 1999)
- III) Children's substance abuse is also predicted by a lack of or inconsistent parental discipline (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 1995; Yoshikawa, 1994).

The experience of Focus on the Family[®] Australia since launching the parenting program *How to Drug Proof Your Kids* also provides a clear example that parents believe they have an important role to play in influencing the choices their children make concerning drug use, and

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want to be empowered through appropriate skilling and access to relevant information and resources. The response from many community organizations would support this. In order to maximise the penetration of the *How to Drug Proof Your Kids* parenting program, it was determined that there was a need to train program facilitators around Australia in order to focus on the social context of each individual and family. This model also allows for greater access by parents to the program. Focus on the Family[®] Australia's twelve-month goal was to train 250 facilitators. In fourteen months since its launch, nearly 750 facilitators have been trained. Most of these are representatives of community agencies, churches and schools in metropolitan and regional areas. There has also been a high demand for this program in rural areas. These facilitators have registered over 300 six-week Parent Programs attended by over 6,000 parents. The level of commitment by parents to attend over six weeks highlights their concerns and desire to learn new skills and strategies. A further 9,000 parents have attended Community Information and Awareness Evenings. Program outcomes are also evaluated by parent feedback forms (quantitative and qualitative), facilitator evaluation and will assist in a longitudinal research program.

3. Challenges Faced by Focus on the Family[®] Australia in Preventing Drug Abuse

Focus on the Family[®] Australia believes there is a need to support proven programs (including the assessment of programs) that focus on areas with the largest influence on youth development, learning and maturation: primarily schools, family members, mentors, peers and community organisations. The *How to Drug Proof Your Kids* program has endeavoured to address most of these influences either directly or indirectly, and consequently has identified numerous issues that have enhanced and hindered the delivery of this preventative program to parents.

(a) Obtaining Community-Based Support

There is no one, simple solution when dealing with drug abuse in our society. Nonetheless, Focus on the Family[®] Australia believes that without the support of local communities and their commitment to deal with this issue in a more proactive and preventative manner, parents lose hope and experience a sense of resignation that there is nothing they can do.

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However, our experience in launching this parent-focused program has met with considerable resistance among certain groups and people who do not believe families, especially parents, have an important role to play. It could be seen that even though policy literature (Federal and State) clearly refers to a parent's role, this role is only of consultation and information provision and not of parent skilling. For example:

- On a number of occasions drug-educators have told us that this program wrongly gives parents hope and involves them in an area where they should have no responsibility. It is the young person's choice whether or not they choose to engage in the harmful use of drugs and parents cannot help in their decision making. Obviously this raises concerns about the approach taken by these educators towards young people in helping to reduce the harmful use of drugs
- We have come to understand that there are some in our society who are opposed to what we are doing because they see it as a threat to their own service, little success, and therefore, long-term access to government funds. Some have extremely aggressive political agendas that we do not get involved with. We have had to deal directly with accusations and aspersions made by such people against Focus on the Family[®] Australia and the *How to Drug Proof Your Kids* program
- Our experience is that not all 'drug' agencies are committed to reducing the harmful use of drugs through the establishment of community partnerships. Trained facilitators in the *How to Drug Proof Your Kids* program have seen their sincere and genuine attempts to conduct parent programs undermined by 'drug' agencies and workers in the drug and alcohol field, rather than being excited about potential outcomes and the formation of strategic partnerships

Put simply, parents Australia-wide have been incredibly excited to participate in this program, but bureaucrats and some professionals are blocking the program based on their own philosophical beliefs. We believe this stance against preventative (and *protective factors*) is in direct conflict with the position formalised by the National Drug Abuse Strategy.

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(b) Issues Arising from Harm Minimisation

Focus on the Family[®] Australia is committed to the Federal Government's Harm Minimisation philosophy that undergirds its strategies to reduce the harmful use of drugs by young people. The *How to Drug Proof Your Kids* program fits under the Demand Reduction component of this philosophy and because it empowers parents to greater and more effective communication with their children about drug use, fits within the Harm Reduction component.

However, whilst committed to the general philosophy, we believe that the above approach needs to be re-evaluated in the light of the escalating drug problem. On the one hand we hear of how this particular approach is important and is effective in discouraging the harmful use of drugs, and yet this seems to conflict with current evidence showing alarming increases in usage rates among young people of illicit drugs, smoking tobacco and binge drinking. From our experience with parents and in counselling young people we believe there are a number of reasons for this incongruity. These are:

- The appropriateness of teaching Harm Reduction strategies to all young people. If the goal is to reduce further harm or potential harm from drug use and associated health risks, then this should target drug users and therefore should be considered essentially an intervention strategy and not a preventative strategy. By focusing primarily on Harm Reduction strategies in schools, it assumes that nearly all young people will engage in the harmful use of drugs as a risk taking behaviour. Many parents are concerned that this approach encourages a young person to experiment with drugs, who would otherwise not have considered this an option. Educational initiatives that concentrate on harm reduction strategies must be continually evaluated to determine that they are not encouraging young people to experiment with drugs eventually leading to more harmful use of drugs and increasing dependency
- Harm Minimisation could be seen to imply acceptance and tolerance of drug use by young people. For example, even among drug educators there is a wide range of views concerning whether or not marijuana is harmful, and considerable debate over whether it should be legalised. In this climate therefore, it becomes increasingly difficult to discourage young people from experimenting with drugs, and convince them that society

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disapproves of illicit drug use and the harmful use of legal drugs such as alcohol, tobacco and prescription medication. This raises the question of, how can we protect the fidelity of this strategy and its original intent from those who see it as an opportunity to promote their own personal views?

- Minimising harm is emphasised rather than eliminating harm. It is argued by some that to eliminate harm is “too hard” and an “impossibility”. This view is a hope-less view and one that has given into the desires of those who exploit and destroy others’ lives to satisfy their own greed for wealth and power. Eliminating harm no longer seems to be viable. Focus on the Family[®] Australia is committed to reducing the number of young people who use drugs in a harmful manner, and is equally committed to eliminating harm that can come from inappropriate drug use ie. Reducing the need that young people have to use drugs. A strong, clear message should be given to young people, rather than one that says drugs will always be with us and we cannot prevent young people from using them
- Statements that refer to Australia as a “drug-taking society” and therefore, by definition condone use, serve only to give acceptance of the range of behaviours central to the issue. Simplistic statements that include legal drugs, mask society’s non-acceptance of harmful drug use (legal and illicit)
- Individuals and organisations that are committed to eliminating harm rather than minimising it are stereotyped as belonging to the Zero Tolerance camp. This group are often portrayed as extinct dinosaurs – out of touch and irrelevant. Unfortunately, what we have seen is the polarisation of groups who hold different views and advocate the use of varying strategies to tackle the issue of drug abuse in our society

(c) Lack of Support from Government Agencies

Although programs do not necessarily require government endorsement to be credible or successful in achieving their objectives, the reality is, people want to know whether or not the government (Federal or State) supports them. The difficulty with this is that governments generally do not endorse programs unless they are created by one of their own departments. Therefore, because non-government programs receive no endorsement, people become suspicious or concerned about them. This fact has placed numerous barriers in front of us as we have tried to respond to an overwhelming demand for the *How to Drug Proof Your Kids* program.

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For example: on a number of occasions we have experienced difficulties in gaining widespread support because organisations that include, Turning the Tide (Education Victoria), the Victoria Police and the Australian Drug Foundation, Alcohol & Drug Services Dept. (Tasmania), etc will not endorse or support others' programs. Representatives of these organisations have expressed many concerns, some of which they are not prepared to put in writing and go on record. Sadly, our experience tells us that it doesn't matter how successful or credible the program, it is seen to be in competition with programs and services created by them. The escalating drug problem convinces us that there is a need for fresh ideas and strategies where there is not only one, right approach. Unfortunately, some of the groups mentioned above have sought to undermine the *How to Drug Proof Your Kids* approach in a very destructive manner. In spite of this experience, we have gone to great lengths (and continue to be) committed to building community partnerships, including with those agencies that do not wholeheartedly support the objectives of the *How to Drug Proof Your Kids* initiative. Again, the talk of community and agency partnerships for many, is nothing but rhetoric.

To counter this particular obstacle, it could be helpful for governments to create national evaluation criteria that could be used objectively to communicate the government's position on a certain program without having to endorse or decline endorsement of a particular program. This would need to recognise a significant variation in the use of terminology and number of approaches where there will not always be consensus among professionals, but nonetheless, does not necessarily discredit the objectives and potential of a program. For example, in Victoria, Turning the Tide utilise a 'School Drug Education Resource File' that provides a basic assessment of individual programs conducted in schools under their individual school drug education strategy guidelines. This could be expanded to include non-school focused programs and incorporate the following review criteria for all programs:

- Degree to which the program objectives match the national strategy
- Degree to which the project findings are based in clear and well articulated theory, clearly stated hypotheses, and clear operational relevance
- Degree to which there is clear evidence of high fidelity implementation
- The overall quality of the process evaluation

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- Quality of the sampling design and its implementation
- Evidence of sample quality based on information about attrition
- Operational relevance and psychometric quality of the measures used in the project's evaluation and quality of supporting evidence
- Quality of implementation of the data collection (eg. Amount of missing data)
- Appropriateness and adequacy of data analysis techniques
- Appropriateness and technical adequacy of statistical analysis
- Degree to which the evaluation addresses and eliminates alternative hypotheses concerning program effects
- Overall level of confidence in project findings based on research design and implementation
- Overall usefulness of project findings for informing prevention theory and practice
- The number of replications or adaptations of model with similar positive results
- The availability of program materials for training, implementation and evaluation
- The cultural and age appropriateness of program materials for specific populations

The Centre for Substance Abuse Prevention, Maryland, U.S.A. (under the Federal Department of Health, USA) uses the above criteria. Focus on the Family[®] Australia has been implementing the above model in relation to its *How to Drug Proof Your Kids* program. The major barrier toward achieving this end in an effective and efficient manner is the lack of financial resources.

(d) Discrimination on the basis of religion, values

In Australia, there are laws governing discrimination against individuals and groups for their age, gender, religious beliefs and personal convictions. This however, does not seem to apply to the area of addressing drug abuse in our society. Programs such as *How to Drug Proof Your Kids* should be evaluated on their content and outcomes and not rejected because of the religious/Christian convictions undergirding the organisation's activities, as has been our experience.

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Focus on the Family[®] Australia is a non-profit, non-government, non-denominational organisation motivated by its commitment to biblical values. As an organisation we believe there is enormous potential in empowering and equipping churches and other faith-based communities to be effective in addressing the issue of drug abuse. Rather than isolate faith-based communities there are significant economic benefits to Australia when addressing issues such as drug abuse through the substantial networks maintained by faith-based communities throughout Australia.

4. Prevention Requires Greater Funding From Government if we are to Tackle Drug Abuse Effectively

In answer to the question, “How are we handling drug abuse”?, Focus on the Family[®] Australia believes that a far greater emphasis needs to be made by the Federal Government in funding and supporting preventative initiatives. Separate funding rounds could be provided for the creation of such programs, and the evaluation of them. When one considers the enormous burden placed on Australian families and society at large through drug abuse, there exists a gross imbalance in terms of what the Government invests in preventative measures that can significantly reduce these escalating costs, compared to resources being invested into treatment or reactive strategies. Furthermore, it is our experience, reinforced through parental feedback from the *How to Drug Proof Your Kids* program, that parents have largely been isolated from drug prevention and education strategies. This oversight makes the issue of drug abuse all the more problematic, and its eradication less likely. As a society we will only ever slow down the escalating drug problems in our society by recognising that there is the need to agree on a diverse set of strategies. To this end, there will be different philosophical approaches based on personal experience, beliefs and interpretation of scientific research. Somehow though, as a society we must identify a common set of core values and principles to undergird any particular approach that has as its goal, to reduce the tragic effects in our society related to drug abuse. This common set of core values and principles could be incorporated within the national review criteria mentioned earlier in this submission.

Education departments will always work to educate students on life skills within their social context. Health departments will always endeavour to implement reactive programs aimed at intervening when a problem arises. Who though, is involved in skilling parents who are

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involved in both of these? We will never effectively tackle drug abuse in our society unless there is an approach that will include the skilling of parents.

Drug abuse is a complex problem in our society that can never be addressed by creating a neatly packaged set of solutions. However, Focus on the Family[®] Australia is committed to empowering and equipping the ‘forgotten generation’ of parents who are desperately wanting to know what role they can play in reducing drug abuse in our society, and in particular, how they can help steer their children away from drug abuse. Until adequate resources are directed toward this end, it will be some time before we can say that we have done all we could to effectively tackle drug abuse in our society.

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