

Why D.A.R.E. didn't work

Alberta drug educators say approaches today more effective, but improvements still needed



Drug use experts are convinced that existing drug education programs are in dire need of reform.

PHOTO BY ASHLEY MATERI

ASHLEY MATERI

amateri@cjournal.ca

WITH FILES FROM MELANIE WALSH

For decades, experts and politicians have tried to educate children about drug and alcohol use by concentrating on the message, "Just say no."

Studies, however, show campaigns such as Project D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) had little to no impact. Experts say, once kids discovered that they could use drugs without dying or suffering permanent damage, they realized that much of what they were told about drugs was a lie.

Calgary health educator Cheryl Houtekamer says such programs failed to teach kids how to avoid drugs, how to go about saying "no," and how to find alternatives.

"It was very focused on the horrible consequences but [there was] very little information or support on how to prevent and build healthier people," says Houtekamer.

Houtekamer, an Alberta Health Services program supervisor who manages health promotion services in the Calgary region says, today's approach offers young people many more tools and skills to deal with stress and self-esteem. The push is to give them more evidence-based information, rather than simplistic messages, which have been proven ineffective.

A 1999 study from the University of Kentucky examined the impact of Project D.A.R.E. a decade after the program was rolled out. Just over 1,000 individuals, who had either received the D.A.R.E. program or a standard drug-education curriculum, were re-evaluated at age 20. The study concluded the D.A.R.E. program had no discernible impact on the students who took it, and very few differences were

found in terms of drug use, attitudes towards drugs, or self-esteem. D.A.R.E. was widely ridiculed.

Recognizing that telling kids to "just say no" wasn't helpful, Houtekamer says Alberta Health Services designed a more evidence-based, developmentally appropriate curriculum for grades 3 to 12. It encourages skill development by teaching young people how to manage stress, how to cultivate healthy relationships and how to communicate with people more effectively. The curriculum is available for free on the AHS website.

"We're building these resilient youth who have skill sets so that if someone is feeling down or they've had something bad happen to them in their life, rather than say, 'I'm going to go use drugs' or 'I'm going to go drink,' they have all these other things that they could do," Houtekamer says.

While drug educators contacted by The Calgary Journal agree they are making progress, there is still some disagreement about approaches. For example, Calgary harm reduction specialist Dominique Denis-Lalonde says people could learn from how she and others work on the front lines with young people using drugs at outdoor music festivals, such as the Shambhala Music Festival near Nelson, B.C.

Because the festival is on private property, she and others are able to provide on-the-ground support to people using drugs. This entails volunteers performing drugs tests for festival-goers, inviting youth who are having difficult experiences into safe spaces, and training volunteers to spot problems and connect



Dominique Denis-Lalonde, a registered nurse and harm reduction specialist, poses in front of a completed substance testing procedure.

PHOTO BY ASHLEY MATERI

directly with young people who are using drugs.

Denis-Lalonde says many youth at festivals on municipal property are also running into problems, but harm reduction specialists like her aren't always welcome to do their work.

"As I see it, it has a lot to do with our drug policy and how we want to just turn a blind eye and [pretend] it's not happening at all at our events, but it clearly is."

Another area where young people are using drugs is post-secondary institutions. Ria Meronek, a counsellor with Mount Royal University Wellness Services, sees many students, some who would have been exposed to programs such as D.A.R.E., lack good mechanisms to deal with the challenges that life throws at them, causing some to abuse drugs or alcohol.

"What makes one student successful over the other in terms of dealing with stress?" Meronek asks. "Do they have good stress management skills or are they turning to something as a quick fix to avoid or to escape?"

She wholly supports all approaches that teach younger children to tackle problems in healthier ways, including stress management and emotional regulation. The result, she says, is well-balanced adults and a healthier society.