



Basic prevention principles

While setting up drug abuse prevention programmes, there are a few general principles that you should follow. These are not in any way meant to restrict the choices that you have but are a sort of distillation of the common wisdom of the people who have worked in the field of drug abuse prevention.

Understand them and keep them in the backs of your minds. However, you don't need to consult them at every step.

- ❖ Drug abuse prevention programmes should be community based, that is, they should involve the whole community or at least the most important parts of it.
- ❖ Your programme should not be too narrow in its focus; for instance, you should not just say that we are an anti-cannabis programme and ignore all the other substances that are abused in your community. Since all forms of substance abuse are usually related to each other in what causes them, you should look at the whole range of substances on a broad scale.
- ❖ Since it is usually young people who are most at risk, they should be the main focus of your programmes. But you must take care to involve other groups which may have an influence on the living conditions and social environment of the main target group.

- ❖❖ Whoever said that prevention is better than cure definitely got it right. It is much better to prevent young people from starting to use drugs than entering at a later stage and helping them give up drugs. This is important to keep in mind because even though some of your programmes will aim at trying to give healthy and creative alternatives to young people who are already using drugs, you must not forget that there is a whole section of your community who might start abusing drugs. And it is this section that you will also need to pay attention to.

You can try and prevent drug abuse by creating healthy and attractive alternatives to substance abuse. Alternatives to substance abuse are attractive if they combine and encourage individual skill development, interesting leisure activities and a supportive attitude in the community.

The following basic elements should provide you with some food for thought:

- ❖❖ ***Promotion of health***

Health can be promoted through personal and cultural practices, which cover basic social and recreational needs. This means that you should support common practices in your community as a whole and in each of the members that promote healthy lifestyles and try to discourage those practices that damage physical and mental well-being.

- ❖❖ ***Focus on people and encouragement of social interaction***

Social skills are best learned in social environments. All your activities should therefore have a strong element of social interaction. Strategies that improve the social climate as a whole should be pursued. Understanding and cooperation between different generations will be improved if you organize activities in which both young and old can take part. This will help young people to communicate with their parents and other adults who influence their lives in the community.

- ❖❖ ***Local involvement of young people and respect for cultural values***

All your activities should closely involve young people from the particular area that you are working in. The values that you try to promote through your programmes should respect cultural traditions of the communities. For example, if you organize a song contest for both boys and girls in a community where girls are not supposed to sing and dance in front of strangers, you will probably meet a lot of resistance.

- ❖❖ ***Encouragement of positive alternatives***

"Positive" is a relative term which must be seen in the light of local values, with understanding of the needs of young people and what appeals to them. All your strategies should try and reinforce the desirable traditions and practices in the community rather than trying to scare people into changing their ways. Of course, this does not mean that you should not talk about the wrong things that you see, but it is better to talk about them calmly than trying to scare people into not doing them.

❖ ***Gaining from research and experience***

All your activities should build on existing research-based evidence regarding (a) How to identify substance abuse related problems; (b) How to find out the causes of the problems; (c) How to find out the possible preventive responses to the identified problems; (d) How to effectively implement preventive activities; (e) How to judge the effectiveness of your activity/programme.

❖ ***Long-term perspective***

Your programmes should take a long-term view of the situation. Changes in the social climate, acceptance of health-promoting values and making interactive, health-promoting activities part of the local culture are all difficult and time-consuming tasks.

❖ ***Specific populations***

The specific needs of vulnerable or disadvantaged youths such as street children, refugees, minority youths and in some cases, young women should be identified and addressed locally.

❖ ***Community development***

Often, the communities that you will be working in may lack resources and provide few opportunities for young people. Prevention programmes require that there is some hope for economic and social improvement. In deprived communities, programmes should be combined with community development work, such as education, health and social services, housing, sanitation or income-generating activities. In order to do this, you may have to talk to local government figures, your representatives in local assemblies, and the rich and influential people in the area and other more powerful people. Please understand that no one expects you to change all these things on your own, you will NOT have failed if you can't make a difference in all these cases. But you will damage your chances of success if you don't even consider these problems and try and come up with innovative ways to combat them.

❖ ***Using the media and popular youth culture***

Young people are strongly influenced by the mass media and other sources outside the local community. Your programmes should try and encourage people like famous pop stars, TV channels and local heroes to contribute to the promotion of health among young people. You can do this by:

- Learning to cope with such influences, advocating more responsible media and treatment of youth issues,
- Encouraging the mass media to look at their marketing practices towards young people,
- Utilizing media and popular youth culture for promoting local health messages and projects.



REMEMBER...

No particular approach or strategy has been proven through rigorous scientific study to be consistently effective over the long term in reducing drug abuse. However, there is some consensus among experts, practitioners and youth themselves on what kinds of elements need to be taken into consideration when designing your prevention programmes for youth:

- a) Not all young people are the same and they are not all equally vulnerable. Strategies should be carefully tailored to clearly defined target groups;*
- b) Using different strategies all together is probably the best way to approach the drug abuse problem. Ideally, they should combine the knowledge/attitude/behaviour approach with health promotion, and the building of self-esteem and resistance skills;*
- c) Your strategies should try to encourage individual strengths and those things that protect individuals in stressful situations and environments, and should try to give youth a set of specific skills for resisting peer pressure to use drugs, for example in communications or relationships with peers. It is also important to offer young people accessible and low-cost opportunities to meet together, cultivate an appreciation for the arts, play sports and take part in other challenging activities that develop self-confidence;*
- d) You should involve young people from your target community at every stage of the development of your prevention programmes;*
- e) Prevention should not focus on one drug only, but it should address, within the wider concept of health promotion, substance abuse in general, including that of tobacco, alcohol and inhalants;*
- f) Young people are usually open to new information if it is factual and does not contradict every part of their personal experience of drugs. Scare tactics reduce the trust that youth may have in the advice of adults and in some cases, even encourage risky behaviour;*
- g) Prevention programmes should include the family and the community at large in order to reinforce the information that is communicated to young people in the context of prevention activities.*