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Defying expectations

The drama of drugs

When working with young people, workers' discovered that expectations were challenged repeatedly and outcomes of sessions were not predictable

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How best to do drug education and prevention? Different approaches have included shock and sensational media campaigns, peer education, harm reduction, substance information, and skills learning. It has been recognised that 'In order to equip young people to make informed choices about drugs no single approach is going to be effective, so a multi-faceted one is recommended.'

Considering this, a South Wales based young people's alcohol and drug service approached working with a group from a unit for young people with educational and behavioural difficulties (EBD), attached to a Comprehensive School in Newport.

The joint working element of the initiative showed the benefits of partnerships in this issue.

Background

Fusion is a young people's alcohol and drug service available to 11-24 year olds in Newport who are concerned about their own, or

someone else's, drinking/substance use.

In the four-tier model of services for children and adolescents set out in the Health Advisory Service (HAS) review (2000), Fusion is a tier two service: a youth orientated service provided by individual practitioners who have some specialised knowledge of drugs and alcohol. The key tasks of tier two services include; assertive outreach and role support to tier one staff such as teachers.

A teacher in the educational and behavioural difficulties unit had become increasingly concerned about the young people's attitude to both drugs and the law. He contacted the local community police officer, who through his role at a community resource centre was aware of Fusion's service and philosophy.

The fact that Fusion is a non-statutory agency was crucial as the teacher was concerned about how the young people would respond to the style of drug prevention and education presented by the police. The feeling was that this particular

group of young people would derive more benefit from an alternative intervention that would give them greater opportunity for discussion of their own experiences, opinions and feelings around alcohol and drugs. This also gave Fusion an opportunity to develop our Motivational Interviewing (MI) approach in a group setting.

Motivational interviewing

Motivational Interviewing was developed in the substance misuse field as a person centred style of working that allows clients to explore thoughts, feelings and behaviour and the possibility of behaviour change.

Workers using the approach are non-judgemental, respectful and facilitative in eliciting the clients concerns about their own behaviour. This style continues when considering solutions and behaviour change encouraging the client to recognise their strengths and abilities enabling them to recognise their responsibility for any behaviour change or non-change.

We felt MI would work well in an educational, group setting with these young people. It was not our role to tell the young people what to think or do about alcohol and drugs, rather to work with them on their own feelings, draw out any concerns they have and develop their ideas of risk and consequences of behaviour. Strategies such as 'rolling with resistance' and 'avoiding argumentation' allowed us stand alongside the young people - rather than put

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ourselves in the role of expert – so they can see that we value their experiences, ideas and feelings.

Objectives

The next stage in the process was to draw up a joint working policy to clarify roles and responsibilities, review, confidentiality issues and objectives.

The main objectives at this stage were:

- ♦ To build effective, trusting relationships with the young people.
- ♦ To provide information on alcohol and drug related issues in a facilitative and discursive manner.
- ♦ To liaise with staff in the unit in the best interests of the young people.

Before we had started this project we had already considered developing MI with drama to address alcohol and drug issues. We had started training with Mark Farrell of Ignition Creative Learning and working with the young people in schools seemed an opportunity to use these skills.

Drama would allow the young people to express themselves in a less personal way and enable them to gain objectivity about substance abuse. We knew that Motivational Interviewing worked well with groups, and with young people. Ignition Creative Learning had successfully combined MI with drama when working with adults who had substance related difficulties.

For young people used to classroom interventions on alcohol and drug use the combination of MI and drama is a radically different approach. Young people such as these are not usually identified for such targeted interventions.

Programme planning

A six-week programme of group work was devised, which included a reward for the young people participating (a motivating factor and self esteem booster). It focussed on the development of a short presentation intended to be performed at a local young person's event, which would provide a forum for young people to express views on issues affecting them.

The original aim was to explore substance use and misuse through developing the performance. The first

stage of planning involved formulating objectives:

- ♦ To explore young people's values and experience without judging or condoning them.
- ♦ To explore their attitudes and feelings about alcohol and substance use without judging them or condoning them.
- ♦ To implicitly explore related issues of self-esteem, identity exclusion, risk-taking, role models and aspirations.



- ♦ To introduce the underlying theme of decision making and assertiveness.

Expectations

Once we began working with the group it became apparent that it would not be appropriate for them to participate in the event as we had planned – they would feel too exposed and vulnerable. So we adapted the programme to produce a performance at a school assembly. This would be an achievement in itself and a self-esteem building exercise for the group.

But our expectations were challenged again when the content and outcome of sessions could not be predicted.

There was also conflict between the facilitative style of MI and the more directive style of drama work.

Although we were challenged and had to revise our approach, this was

largely about our expectations. But more was achieved through starting with high expectations and revising them downward than if we had begun with low expectations and thus limited the young people's opportunity for achievement.

Flexibility

Weekly communication between the young people's teacher and us was integral to the programme. This enabled us to focus sessions on the

needs of the young people. We became aware that these needs could change from week to week – it could also affect their ability to participate.

Home and social environment had a clear affect: the young people often had difficulties at home that influenced emotions and behaviour in school. Outside a session, an incident may have occurred where a young person would have to be removed from the class. Occasionally there was violence.

The work we were doing on substance use raised sensitive issues for them and we were moved by their willingness to talk openly and honestly about their lives. The extent of awareness and experience of alcohol and drugs was at times frightening – a lot of myths were taken as fact.

Our initial six-week programme was often adapted and, after a formal review with the special needs teacher,

we decided to work with the group for an additional five weeks. Our revised programme included more games, discussion and quizzes in addition to the drama. We focused on exploring the harm and risks of alcohol and drug use, the experience of harm and risk, problem solving and assertiveness.

We used photographs to record scenes depicting drug and alcohol use, which were used within the school as a display of the young people's achievements.

Evaluation

We met up with the group two months later to evaluate the effect of the work. Their teacher felt there was a raised awareness of effects, risks and consequences of alcohol and drug use. Our discussion with the young people supported this.

In informal discussion we elicited their opinions on alcohol and drug education – why people use substances and society's influence on young people's behaviour. The level of discussion was impressive and more considered than it had been before.

The young people thought that education on alcohol and drugs should begin in primary school, as it was too late by the time they were in secondary. They felt that it was important to have specialist drug and alcohol workers coming in and they gave us some suggestions for future work.

The family, depression, and the media were all identified as factors influencing a young person's behaviour. They also thought that environment was an influence – one young person described needles lying

around close to his home in a deprived area of Newport.

Their comments showed awareness that substance use/misuse may affect any member of society, not just those who are seen as socially excluded.

In addition to the discussion, we used pictures of various drugs and alcohol to check recognition and knowledge. We also asked whether it was something they had taken, or would take in the future (see Table below).

The three young people who had some experience of substance use were adamant they would never take ecstasy, heroin or solvents again. The young person who had no previous

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experience of substances felt better informed and able to make a decision.

What we learnt

Flexibility and adaptability was key. Our expectations and plans were points of reference, but we soon learnt to expect the unexpected. It was also crucial that we had open lines of communication with the teaching staff so that we were working as one unit.

We were impressed by the willingness of these young people, generally regarded as 'difficult', to participate in something new. Given the opportunity and offered a

different reflection of themselves they showed ability to solve problems and formulate opinions.

What next?

We have been asked to facilitate a similar programme with another group of young people in the unit. The next programme will focus on consequences, legality, awareness raising and decision-making.

To keep boundaries between the various agencies unambiguous it was decided that Gwent Constabulary's Drug Education Officer would open the programme with a presentation on the effects and recognition of different substances and information on legal issues.

We will then facilitate interactive and therapeutic work around issues raised by this presentation. Drama techniques will be used but we do not anticipate any end performance at the moment.

'Drug education is not so much about drugs but more about the young people themselves—their values and attitudes, their relationships, their problems, their risk taking, their decisions, their sensation seeking. There are 'drug pathways' along which young people travel in their attitudes and behaviour. Therefore, children and young people need to be engaged actively in the process which addresses knowledge, attitudes and values and behaviour' ■

	Recognition	Knowledge of effects	Had taken before	Would take in future
Cannabis	3/3	3/3	3/3	3/3
Alcohol	3/3	3/3	3/3	3/3
Amphetamine	3/3	3/3	1/3	1/3
Ecstasy	3/3	3/3	1/3	0/3
Heroin	3/3	3/3	0/3	0/3
Aerosols/solvents	3/3	3/3	1/3	0/3

References:

1. Davies, G. T. & Pates, R. (2000) *Drug Education Handbook for Teachers and Youth Workers*. Cardiff: Welsh Drug and Alcohol Unit.
2. Health Advisory Service, (2001), *Review 2001: the substance of young needs*, London: HAS. Available at Home Office website as a pdf file http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/dpas/review_substance.pdf