

Speaking the same language

FAST FORWARD, THE Edinburgh-based peer and drug education agency, has just carried out a number of educational sessions with groups of parents. These groups ranged from parent discussion groups, parent support groups, school PTA groups and concerned community/parent networks. There does seem to be a demand for this sort of work, but some groups find it difficult to contact the relevant agencies.

Our approach differs somewhat from the norm of simply providing factual information – street names, the effects of drug use, how to spot the symptoms and the like. Based on qualitative and

Adults are:

- concerned about young people's drug use
- aware of young people's relatively disempowered position in society and are concerned for their well-being
- feel ill-equipped to tackle the issue of drugs
- recognise that their perception of drugs differs from that of young people
- accept the need to be 'realistic' in their approach to drug problems
- feel constrained in their 'public' response to drugs by their perceived role or status in society

quantitative research – and involving our own young volunteers – we aim to give parents a reasonably objective view of a young person's perspective on drugs. This will attempt to contextualise the distinctions between illegal and legal drugs, focusing both on young people's perceptions of adult hypocrisy and on young people's increasingly permissive attitudes towards drug use (non-users being uncritical of users, for example).

This approach has met with varying degrees of success. The vast majority of groups were extremely grateful for our input and the information materials which we provided. The opportunity to ask questions was particularly valued as were the discussions which resulted. Ultimately, parents wanted to feel confident when talking to their children.

However, a significant minority of the groups resisted the young person's perspective and dismissed its validity. These groups remained uncritical of legal drug use and indiscriminately critical of illegal drugs ("I'd prefer my laddie to get pissed than smoke a joint"). Observations that some young people preferred their parents to smoke cannabis than drink due to lower levels of ensuing domestic violence were rejected as inconceivable.

The influence of the popular media was all too

The article on 'Mobilising Parents' recommended that drug workers should address parent groups.

One educational organisation has done just that in Scotland.

Neil Robertson tells *Druglink* about the successes and failures of such an approach

evident in simplistic preconceptions as to the sort of people who use drugs (*all drug users are junkies*) and overcoming this influence took a great deal of time and patience. A number of groups displayed a marked reluctance to analyse their own drug-related attitudes and behaviour and this too took some time to develop.

Despite these areas where the sessions ran into difficulties, we do believe that overall the programme was successful. Additionally, we carried out a needs assessment – of 129 adults on behalf of the Health Education Board for Scotland – to identify what parents want. (See the boxes for action points.)

When asked how an educational message could be got across to parents, the need to promote parenting skills was seen by 99 per cent of respondents as crucial to building an understanding between parents and their children. This was closely followed by the

Adults need:

- information which is straight, non-medical and non-alarmist
- to have their attitudes challenged sensitively
- to be able to bridge the 'perceptual gap' with young people by finding an appropriate 'language'
- reassurance that they do have a role to play in drug education
- 'safe' opportunities to explore drug issues together
- programmes that are sufficiently unified to be cohesive, yet sufficiently flexible to take account of the range of factors that shape and constrain adult responses

by

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SUMMARY

A peer education group in Edinburgh has recently sought to work with parents by carrying out discussion sessions with pre-existing parent groups. This is a continuation of its work with young people and has met with a great deal of success. Some parent groups, however, did not respond well to a young person's perspective on drugs and more work will be needed in future to make sessions with such groups productive. A needs assessment found that parents recognised that their parenting skills should be targeted as an area for improvement.

setting up of a resource unit for youth workers (98 per cent) and the production of video clips ('info-bites') by young people (96 per cent).

The overwhelming response to the need to develop parenting skills is a recognition both of parents' lack of knowledge and the low quality of inter-generational discussion. And while it was accepted that young people's drug use did not necessarily reflect poor parenting, many parents blamed themselves (or felt that they would blame themselves) if their children used illegal drugs. This tended to result in a rather one-sided conversation with their children.

When all's said and done, we urgently need to forge a common language, but there was pessimism as to whether any productive debate could take place between parents and children. Even the sceptics, however, conceded that a more neutral structure – such as that imposed by collaboration in homework exercises – represented the best chance of success. ○