

High School Students talk about **Drug Education Programs**

This transcript is from an interview with several high school students that was conducted by Joel Brown, Ph.D. in 1993 as part of the California Drug, Alcohol, and Tobacco Education (DATE) evaluation sponsored by the California State Department of Education.

Interviewer: I have a question. What should the goal of these [drug education] programs be? Should the goal be to get you guys never to drink alcohol, smoke a cigarette or smoke a joint? What should it be?

Respondent: To know what your limitations are, to make yourself aware enough so that you know—personally, I've never felt very worried that I would ever become a substance abuser. When I was like in elementary school it was crammed down my throat, "Just Say No..." it's the most awful thing in the world, and so when it first came, like in ninth grade, I remember this girl was trying to get me to do pot I'm like, "No, that's evil." It was that kind of a thing, but I think the goal of education should be you're going to be in the situation, you're going to see this, that and the other thing, it's not evil if you've got a good enough sense of self worth, if you know what your boundaries are, if you know what you feel comfortable with and if you know what it's going to do to you and you know what the consequences may be.

I: OK, I'm not trying to put you off, but I have a question that comes from that, which I think is very important. You mentioned getting stuff in elementary school and junior high school, have all of you gotten something?

R: [Several voices] Yes.

I: I'm wondering what happens between what you get—we've spoken to elementary school kids and junior high school kids and they all think that what they're getting is hard and what we're trying to figure out is what happens between elementary school and junior high school and then high school.

R: Reality.

R: Yeah. [Yes]

I: [Laugh] What do you mean reality?

R: When you're younger and much more impressionable you look up to your teachers, you take everything that they say, so you respect everything they say, you don't want to disappoint; your teachers, your parents have certain expectations of you, the pressure is not on to do all that stuff when you're in elementary...

R: Actually the pressure is—it's just the opposite. I remember being invited to a party

when I was in sixth grade and some guy lit up a cigarette and my boyfriend threw him into the pool and everybody was like beating him up because he did that and now it's like— [Laugh]

I: So what switched?

R: Well, what happened is that we, first of all, were influenced by other things when we were younger—like we looked up to our superheroes and our cartoon characters and the Sesame Street people—and by the time you get to middle school you don't want to be like elementary school kids anymore, you want to be like the high school kids, so you find out what they do at their parties and what your older brothers and sisters are doing. You also have more of your own mind, the teachers don't think you're as impressionable as you were when you were younger, they're not going to preach to you, so they're just going to tell you what is in the curriculum because really what they tell you is not going to really make an impact. I think what it would be neat to do is bring in recovering substance abusers who abused as teenagers and have them tell the class this is what happened to my life when I was an abuser and show them how it destroyed their life and that way teenagers can relate. When you're talking to somebody twenty years older than you who is going to preach to you Just Say No that kind of thing does not really get home, it doesn't last, you need something that is really, I don't know, kind of like our AIDS program.

R: [Several voices] Yeah. [Yes]

R: I also wanted to say that what I think that part of the problem seems to be is that any subject the teachers or anybody is really uncomfortable talking about it seems to all get pushed to the side and I think that more with drug and alcohol abuse, I think that it is something that people are very uncomfortable talking about.

I: You mean adults?

R: Yes, adults. I think that, especially, I guess, when you're in high school or junior high, also, when somebody says to you don't do this, because it's bad, you know, the automatic

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reaction of a teenager growing up is to say why is it bad? Everybody is curious about what this does, the way they're curious about anything and I think that by just saying that it's bad and just putting things in the curriculum is doing that without saying this is why, this is what can happen, and showing what can happen to you and presenting both sides realistically and when you don't do that then people don't know what the consequences are and are more apt to stray...

I: What's both sides? Sorry.

R: I think at the same time as presenting everything that is bad, you can't just preach one side, you have to somehow, I mean, you can't ignore that sometimes it feels good to be drunk and that sometimes it feels good to—you might want to smoke a joint, you might want to escape, I mean...

I: Yes but then they say well that's promoting you guys using substances.

R: No it is just admitting the fact that...

R: That temptation is there. I mean, just because you're saying, just like when we're talking about AIDS, just because we're saying if you're going to have sex use condoms does not mean I'm going to have sex now because you told me about that. It just means that if it happens I know what's out there because the more you know, the more you're prepared. Nobody ever said anything like that to me and I think when you get into high school it is just such a different world than junior high you want to fit in and explore everything so much and when you find out these things a lot of the old barriers come crashing down that you've had when you were in junior high.

R: I think the problem with education is—this kind of education—is that you're constantly being shoved down your throat it's so wrong, if you do it you're a terrible, evil person, instead of just educating saying I know some of

you people do it, why do you do it, let's try to help you so you don't do it any more. If it is shoved into you that you're a terrible person when you do this, you know, you kind of want to back away from the education process because they've already made a judgement upon you, you're a terrible person if you smoke marijuana, if you do alcohol, if you smoke cigarettes, you're a terrible person, instead of approaching it as, OK, you guys do it, let's help you now.

I: So then the goal should be to get people into not doing it.

R: No I'm not saying that, I'm saying the goal should be to evaluate yourself and figure out why you do it, evaluate your own personal habits and your personal values and morals.

R: I don't think it is realistic to assume that anyone is not going to try some things in their life, I mean, it's ridiculous that presidents—I think that is a part of growing up...

I: Finish that thought.

R: I think it's ridiculous that presidents get judged on their—if Bill Clinton inhaled or not, I think that's stupid. Everybody—we've talked about this in psychology, when you grow up you go through different experiences and you need to make mistakes and you make some things that aren't mistakes and that's how you learn and you don't want anyone to learn the very hard way by making huge mistakes, but it's OK if people make little mistakes and you can forgive them for those, you can forgive them for the big mistakes too, you know. I think it's very tough on a lot of kids thinking, OK, this is the way my parents want me to grow up, I'm supposed to do these kind of grades when I'm in junior high, have these friends and in high school I should be like this or whatever and where is the room for experimenting so that you can expand your mind. I think if you educated students well enough they wouldn't feel the need to make as many mistakes to find these things out because if you educated them well enough they wouldn't need to make the mistakes to learn what they need to learn. •