

## Approaches to Drug Abuse Prevention

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### ABSTRACT

This article concerns the drug abuse related definitions of the words "education" and "prevention" as they have come to be used today. The writer states that "prevention" has come to have a wide spectrum of meanings encompassing in some contexts the arenas of treatment and rehabilitation. "Education" as it is used in drug abuse related contexts is generally used in a restricted sense although this has been changing. She infers that the changing uses of these words reflects an increasingly more enlightened approach to ameliorating the problem of drug abuse.

### Approaches to Drug Abuse Prevention

A wide variety of prevention programs is presently being implemented at the local and community level in an effort to decrease the incidence of drug abuse. In an increasing number of communities, the repressive, legalistic, and coercive approaches which have so long been employed to attack the drug abuse problem are being significantly augmented by, if not replaced by, educational and other preventive approaches.

In order to more clearly delineate between the widely varying types of approaches being employed, it would be helpful to define "education" and "prevention" as these terms are currently being applied in a variety of contexts. Each of these contexts is based on a somewhat differing view as to the causes and effects of the problem of drug abuse as well as differing ideas as to the

means of intervening most successfully to ameliorate the problem.

### **The Meaning of "Education"**

"Education" has typically been narrowly defined when applied to the problem of drug abuse. It is used to mean the transfer of knowledge about drugs and the effects of drugs. This informational or cognitive emphasis has very often excluded any emphasis upon the non-cognitive or affective domain (i.e., attitudes, values, developmental needs). The educational approach which emphasizes the cognitive domain is generally based on a definition of the problem of drug abuse in which it is assumed that given adequate knowledge of the facts concerning the effects, the risks, etc., inherent in using various drugs, the user or would-be user will make the decision not to engage in such risky or decidedly harmful behavior. Those who emphasize the cognitive or informational approach often view the problem of drug abuse in such a way as to effectively ignore the attitudes and values of many of those who experiment with drugs or become dependent upon drugs despite knowledge of the facts or knowledge of the risks involved. The cognitive approach has typically been based on a definition of the problem which has not allowed for an adequate consideration of the irrational or non-rational elements which influence decision making and behavior. Although the cognitive approach has been an exceedingly popular one, a trend toward increasingly non-cognitive approaches is becoming more and more evident. The definition of "education" as it is currently being applied to the drug abuse problem is now being extended to encompass basic behavioral as well as developmental considerations. Drug abuse "education" as it has come to be used in many quarters has also come to be synonymous with drug abuse "prevention."

### **The Meaning of "Prevention"**

"Prevention" as it is applied to drug abuse can also have a variety of meanings. To some, drug abuse "prevention" has the same meaning as drug abuse "education." To those who define drug abuse "education" in the narrow cognitive sense, drug abuse "prevention" is a similarly limited concept. The affective approach to drug abuse prevention/education can also be applied interchangeably to either term. "Prevention," however, as it sometimes

has been used has additional levels of meanings that "education" does not usually have.

"Prevention" and "education" can be used in a wide variety of contexts. Prevention may be used in such a way as to exclude rehabilitation and treatment. On the other hand "preventive" efforts in drug abuse may be construed in such a way as to include rehabilitation and treatment efforts in that rehabilitation and treatment in effect can prevent the continuance of drug abuse behavior.

Prevention may also be seen as encompassing intervention efforts in the broadest sense, that is, intervening in the cycle of drug abuse behavior at any point prior to a time that treatment and rehabilitation may be required. Some would include under the rubric of drug abuse education such preventive intervention efforts. Others would consider preventive intervention as treatment and therefore beyond the realm of drug abuse education or prevention.\*

Many who have approached the drug abuse problem attempt to manipulate and manage symptoms to prevent their appearance or temporarily arrest them. Such persons generally have defined the problem of drug abuse in a superficial way. The result has been that the underlying causes of drug abuse behavior (beyond the fact that the drugs are available) are overlooked or dealt with summarily. Efforts to respond to some of the causes underlying drug abuse behavior can also be called preventive efforts. In this sense, rehabilitation must incorporate a preventive component in that drug abuse behavior is rarely to be arrested unless underlying causes have been dealt with. These underlying causes include environmental factors, personal and interpersonal causes, as well as the problematic nature of the human condition itself.

These developmental and often remedial concerns are coming to be viewed increasingly as falling within the purview of prevention. The acceptance of their relevance to minimizing drug abuse is bound to be slow in coming in part owing to the usual slowness of processes both of learning and of social change and in part owing to the superficial way in which most persons have understood the problem of drug abuse up until now.

\* It may well be that the failure to relegate preventive intervention to any distinct area has in part been responsible for neglect in this area.