

Children And Drugs

Understanding The Problem And The Solution

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When the National Masonic Foundation for Children was founded by the North American Conference of Grand Masters in 1986, we asked ourselves what might be our appropriate role in helping to reach a solution to the problem of drugs in our nation. We, of course, recognized that no one had enough resources to tackle the entire scope of the problem alone. We were surprised to discover, on examination, that even at that late date there was not only no attempt at coordinating a defined national effort, there was no understanding of what that effort might look like, or what a rational solution might be ! We had to define it for ourselves.

There are four elements to the solution of the problem of drug and alcohol abuse among our children: Awareness, Treatment, Enforcement, and Prevention.

The reason we as a country have experienced such great frustration in dealing with the problem, and have made such minuscule progress, is because the right balance among these four elements, and the way in which they must work together, is almost universally misunderstood. This misunderstanding has cost us billions, with little to show for it.

Awareness programs, including everything from wall posters to TV specials, are an absolutely necessary element to the solution. But there is a belief among some in our society that pouring enough information on the problem will put out the fire, that we can somehow talk this problem to death. This will not happen!

There is also considerable evidence that pursuing information programs – in isolation – can produce the opposite result from what is intended! Let me take space here for just one among many examples: One of the most popular anti-drug programs of the eighties (and still today among those who have not yet gotten the word) was to put recovered addicts from the Hollywood and sports worlds in front of classrooms of kids to tell their stories. The intent was obvious, the results were not. While you and I, as adults, hear the miracle of recovery in those stories, a federal Department of Education study demonstrated more than ten years ago that children are different from you and me. Kids hear "success" and "drugs" as synonymous in these stories; they don't separate the message!

Further, those who think we are going to scare kids out of taking drugs are blinding themselves to the obvious: children, and particularly at-risk children, love horror stories and horror movies. This has been known for a long time – think of the themes in our oldest fairy tales. There also is the famous example of the anti-drug commercial with the frying egg ("this is your brain on drugs"). A study more than a year ago showed that the youth population targeted by that ad, at-risk children, has an opposite reaction to what is hoped for, sometimes with tragic results. Kids are different from adults, and our solutions must be tailored to that difference if we're going to stop the addictive cycle in this country.

There are other such examples that all lead to one conclusion: Information programs alone actually can lead to harmful results if the total dynamic of the solution is not understood. Information must be combined with specific actions if the right results are to take place.

Treatment programs also are an absolutely necessary element to the solution for any society that seeks to call itself humane. If someone who has fallen into the pit of addiction can find the will to honestly ask for help, a helping hand should be there. But treatment professionals themselves admit that the resources aren't sufficient, and probably never will be, for treatment alone to catch up to a problem of this scope. Or as succinctly put by a prevention professional recently, "You don't win a war by treating the wounded."

Enforcement programs can keep the dam from bursting and buy time for we, the people, to solve this agonizing social problem. But that isn't the way it's happening. Many among our leadership, including specifically our political leadership, insist on trying to solve social problems with enforcement programs. Enforcement, by definition, is not designed or intended to, alone, solve social problems. Enforcement officials can be, and have been, very articulate in trying to point this out.

The idea that we can kill all the bad guys and leave the good guys standing seems to have a flaw in it.

There also seems to be plentiful evidence that spending billions to try to stop the flow of an endless array of addictive substances is a fool's game. One among too many examples: Interdiction programs that aimed to destroy cocaine at its source, the coca fields, have been popular throughout recent years. In the early 90's military personnel spent hundreds of millions of dollars in one operation to destroy the Colombian coca crop. They succeeded in destroying an estimated 2 percent of that year's crop. Insects destroy 20 percent.

Prevention, working with children to stop the addictive cycle before it can get started, is the only one of the four elements that holds hope for a long-term, effective solution to the problem of addiction in our country. It is also possibly the most misunderstood of the four elements. For example, as indicated earlier, there is a great deal of confusion among many very well-intended people that Awareness programs and Prevention programs are synonymous. They are not.

Giving information does not mean that prevention is taking place. This misunderstanding has led to a great deal of wasted time, money, and effort. And to frustration.

One of the supreme ironies about drug addiction is that our citizens demand a quick-fix to a problem that is itself a search for a quick-fix to problems.

We seldom discuss or examine our role because if we did we would begin to see that we have met the enemy and it is us. Politicians, at least those who have made an art of taxing the productive members of our society in order to buy votes from the least productive, gravitate easily toward the demagoguery of promising to devote more and more of our money to killing the bad guys, and this continues in spite of failure after failure. It doesn't work because it directs huge sums of money toward symptoms and leaves causes untouched. (And "causes" go much, much deeper than jobs, or homelessness, or any of the other afflictions that are put forth to pry money from the public treasury.)

Why are too many of our children putting this stuff in their bodies? They do it because they are in pain and they become desperate to change the way they feel. And we can say "just say no" until we are out of breath, but when a friend of their's says "try this" and they try it and the pain immediately goes away, all the warnings about ruining their body and ruining their life are not as powerful as that pain disappearing. Almost all their role models, adults and peers, parents and personal friends, TV and movie stars, exemplify by their behavior a quick-fix society (think of aspirin ads, for example). The power of example will defeat rhetoric every time; Freemasonry teaches us that.

This problem did not develop overnight, or in the 1980s, or the '70s or '60s, or even this century. It is not new. What is new is the way the barrier formerly protecting our children our future – has dropped, and the way the problem has reached into ever more segments of our daily life. What is new is that the problem is demanding to be solved, or it will tear us apart.

The solution can thus be seen to be long term – helping the youngest among us. And the solution to this problem is not more jobs, or more money, or more houses, but goes to the very heart, the foundation, of any society – in recognizing that the role we have accepted for millennia, the role of developing the brainpower of our youth, is no longer by itself enough. We can no longer regard principles and ethics and emotional values as theory or as simply old ideas moldering in dusty tomes.

We must look with fresh eyes at how and what we teach our children.

Of the four elements to the solution, only one, prevention, works to turn the problem around. We repeat: Enforcement controls the problem while we solve the problem; enforcement is not designed to solve social problems – or it would no longer be, by definition, enforcement. Treatment must be available in a humane society, but we can't win the war on drugs by treating the wounded. Information programs are necessary to keep us informed, but expecting it to do more than that can lead to exactly opposite results from what we want.

"Masonic Model" Student Assistance Training is the best prevention program available. It is not a quick-fix. What recommends it most strongly is that, unlike the foregoing approaches, it works! It systematically puts caring adults together with children in pain. No one attending the training sessions has failed to come away without the understanding that they have seen the principles of the solution in action !

The solution exists. It is not a quick fix. It is long term. It only needs increased support to begin turning this problem around – and the benefits of pursuing this course go far beyond the subject of drugs and alcohol.

Our next Short Talk will discuss Freemasonry's role in helping our children fight this problem.

The following list of Short Talk Bulletins also deal with the subject of Children and Drugs.

5-87 Masons Care About Children

1-89 Drug and Alcohol Abuse: A Masonic Response

5-92 Drug and Alcohol Abuse Problem: Lodges Can Help

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