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The Alternatives Approach: A Strategy to Prevent Alcohol and Other Drug Use Among Youth



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The Alternatives Approach: A Strategy to Prevent Alcohol and Drug Use Among Youth

By

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One of the most common approaches employed to prevent alcohol and other drug use among youth has been to offer alternative activities for youth. Typical activities have included dances, sporting competitions, membership in youth groups, parties, and so on. Yet, the question remains: Do alternative activities really prevent alcohol and other drug use among youth?

The answer is not a simple "yes" or "no". There is some indication that alternatives may help in the prevention effort if program planners give careful attention to the selection, design and structure of the alternative activity. A review of the alternatives approach will position program planners to be more effective and strategic in their prevention efforts.

Background

The alternatives approach surfaced in the 1960's as one of the first responses to the drug problem (Swisher & Hu, 1983; Cook, 1985). Through observations of animal behavior, it was noted that when the young engaged in undesirable behavior, the parents would subsequently divert their attention to a more acceptable activity.

This strategy was thought to hold potential for changing undesirable human behaviors. Cook (1985) theorized a chain of assumptions underlying the alternatives approach.

"Chain of Assumptions"

Drug use/abuse fulfills certain social, psychological and physiological wants and needs.

A variety of nonchemical activities and experiences are also capable of fulfilling these needs and wants in a much healthier way.

Through participation in these nonchemical activities and experiences, each individual will fulfill these needs and wants and therefore, not have to use/abuse drugs. Instead, s/he will proceed to a healthier lifestyle.

Thus, making alternative activities available to youth in a community will bring about a decrease in the use and abuse of drugs.

Initially, enthusiasm was high for this approach, although within recent years, questions have arisen regarding the impact of the alternatives approach.

According to Cook (1985), the major problem of the alternatives approach is the lack of criteria or guidelines for the selection and development of activities. This has resulted in the current situation where virtually any and all activities qualify as because they are labeled activities. In fact, some researchers argue these activities are merely substitutes for the problem behavior experience, or as Schaps & Slimmon (1975) call it "an unwitting endorsement of sensation seeking". Such activities may result in no beneficial impact on preventing alcohol and other drug use or may, in fact, even contribute to this undesirable behavior (Swisher & Hu, 1983).

Another weakness in the alternatives approach can be found in the types of activities. According to Schaps & Slimmon (1975) the majority of programs are relatively "traditional" and appeal to those youth least likely to use/abuse drugs.

A third limitation of the alternatives approach is a lack of evaluation literature. There is little data upon which conclusions of the program's merit can be based. Available research has found that some alternatives do detract from drug abuse just as other alternatives have been correlated with contributing to drug use. Nonetheless, prevention efforts will have better chances of success if specific criteria are addressed in the selection and design of alternative activities.

Criteria for Selecting and Planning an Alternative Activity

The first and foremost criterion revolves around this premise: If alternatives are to meet the needs met through using drugs, then these needs must first be identified. Cook (1985) outlined a list of needs met through alcohol and other drug use after a review of the literature.

Unfulfilled Needs Met by Using/Abusing Drugs

I. Behavioral-Psychological Needs

- Release from inhibition and tension, promoting social interaction
- Feelings of euphoria
- Stimulation/activation
- Altered states of consciousness

II. Social-Psychological Needs

- Independence and rebellion
- Peer group acceptance
- Self-esteem enhancement

Program planners who design alternative activities which meet these and other unfulfilled needs are likely to increase the effectiveness of their prevention efforts.

Other criteria need to be applied in the selection and design of effective alternative activities. A review of the research (Cook, 1985; Schaps & Slimmon, 1975; and Tobler, 1986) has resulted in the following guidelines for program designers.

Criteria for the Selection and Design of Alternative Activities

1. *The central needs fulfilled through alcohol and other drug use are identified and alternative activities are then planned to meet these needs* (Cook; Schaps & Slimmon).
2. *Young people are involved in the planning and implementation* - To create ownership and commitment to the activity, youth involvement is vital (Schaps & Slimmon).
3. *The activity reflects the preferences of the youth* - Formal and informal polls are one technique to gather such information; activities unfamiliar to youth, though, need not be ruled out unless youth are clearly opposed (Cook).
4. *Young people are actively involved rather than passive participants* - Youth need to do more than just attend the activity; the majority of their time should be spent actively engaged in the program (Cook).
5. *The activity is pleasurable and self-reinforcing, especially in the beginning* - Upon completion of the activity, the goal is to have youth excited to participate again; an activity which requires lengthy skill development before one can enjoy the activity may serve as a disincentive to some youth (Cook; Schaps & Slimmon).
6. *The activity offers long-term satisfaction* - A useful alternative offers short and long-term satisfaction; the latter is especially important as virtually no long-term satisfaction results from alcohol and other drug use (Schaps & Slimmon).
7. *Drug use is incompatible with the activity* - Certain activities may actually go hand-in-hand with drinking or use of other drugs, such as attending a rock concert and alcohol use (Schaps & Slimmon).
8. *A valued service is provided to others via the activity* - Experiences in which youth feel needed and contributing to others helps to build feelings of self-worth (Schaps & Slimmon).
9. *The activity is feasible and practical to engage in and continue* - Activities should not require expensive equipment; furthermore, activities should be held in practical and easily accessible locations (Cook).
10. *The opportunity to acquire practical skills which can be used throughout life is provided* - Drug involvement results in little skill development; independence as well as increased feelings of self-worth can be fostered when practical skills are acquired (Schaps & Slimmon). Tobler (1986) found alternative programs emphasizing skill development to be highly successful in reducing teen drug use among special populations such as juvenile delinquents, students experiencing school problems and drug abusers. Alternatives included remedial tutoring, one-on-one relationships, job skills and physical adventure experiences.
11. *Participation is voluntary* - If participation in an alternative is mandated, the activity is no longer an option (Schaps & Slimmon).

Types and Models of Alternative Programming

What healthful activities and experiences can realistically be offered which will reduce negative feelings and emotions, and induce the positive states that individuals seek through drug use? There is an array of various activities which might possibly serve as actual alternatives. Dohner (1972) listed a broad range of types of alternative activities:

- Personal Awareness (athletics, dance, yoga, biofeedback)
- Interpersonal Relations (group experiences focusing on concern, sharing, respect, etc.)
- Self-Reliance Development (basic skill development such as in money management, auto mechanics, household maintenance)
- Vocational Skills (marketable skills of printing, carpentry, etc.)
- Aesthetic Experiences (music courses, pottery classes, art exhibits)
- Creative Experiences (sketching, painting, weaving)
- Intellectual Experiences (removed from forced learning and grades)
- Spiritual-Mystical Experiences (in and outside of organized religion)
- Social-Political involvement (political candidates and parties, VISTA)
- Sexual Expression and Experience (acceptance of one's body and sexuality)
- Meditation (altered states of consciousness)

Typical alternative activities consist of a unique activity or set of activities designed for youth. Examples include dances, day trips to amusement parks, ski areas and so on as well as the establishment of youth centers. The limited evaluation on this more typical approach of alternative programs has indicated little effectiveness in self-reported substance use rates among youth participants.

A second approach in alternative activity programming is to match specific needs of youth with specific types of activities. This involves matching unfulfilled needs of individuals with alternatives and the individualization of activities rather than predetermined activities or groups of activities. One example is the need for physical satisfaction; youth who indicate this need could be matched with an alternative outdoor activity such as hiking or rock climbing to provide the opportunity for positive risk-taking.

Barnes and Olson (1977) found that alcohol and illicit drugs were used significantly more to achieve positive states, such as adventure, pleasure, and camaraderie than to relieve negative states, i.e. depression or sadness. Non-drug activities identified as ways to achieve positive states included social activities, physical activities and risk-taking behaviors (Barnes and Olson, 1977). This investigation also

revealed that alternatives used to reduce negative states were seldom the same ones used to achieve a positive state and vice versa. Knowing which alternatives (discussions with friends, social and physical activities, etc.) to pair with the corresponding need will increase the likelihood of success.

Rather than creating new activities, a third approach is to enhance existing alternatives. Encouraging, expanding and involving others in already existing small group activities may not only serve to strengthen these current activities and groups, but is an efficient and effective use of program planners' time.

Another approach to alternative activity programming is self-directed youth alternatives. In this approach, youth assume responsibility for initiating alternative activities of their own choosing which, often times focus on community needs.

Although a variety of activities and approaches are available and could, in a particular instance, serve to supplant a desire for drugs, only a limited number combine prevention with feasibility and practicality (Cook, 1985). Thus, it is imperative that prevention professionals and community program planners select and structure activities which are effective alternatives to drug use.

CONCLUSION

A review of the literature on the alternatives approach leads to recommendations for future study. According to Cook, Lawrence, Morse and Roehl (1983), the alternatives approach holds "considerable promise, but that substantial research, both basic and applied" remains to be done. Swisher & Hu (1983) advocate further research to investigate what types of activities have the most positive effects on various groups of youth. Preliminary study of physical activity, mood and drug use has suggested that exercise may play a meaningful role in drug abuse prevention (Cook, 1985). Cook advises research should be conducted on the relationship between exercise and drug use.

Alternatives need to be not only structured according to specific criteria, but also evaluated. Sparse evaluation literature has contributed to wavering support of the alternatives approach by some prevention specialists in recent years.

This review of the alternatives approach argues for prevention efforts which are comprehensive in nature. No single activity or series of activities will, on its own, prevent the use/abuse of alcohol and other drugs. Similar to other prevention strategies, the alternatives approach must address the individual's internal states, interpersonal skills and environmental forces existing in the family, peer group, school and community (Grimes & Swisher, 1989).

A lack of definitive guidelines in the alternatives approach poses a challenge to program planners. Because of this inherent ambiguity, the goal of the alternatives approach should be foremost in activity development:

"... to replace drug-taking with something that has the long-term effect of promoting personal and spiritual well-being and growth while helping to satisfy and fulfill the unmet needs and aspirations which give rise to drug-taking behavior in the first place." (Gordon, 1972)

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