



the dope show:
program summary and literature review

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Introduction

The Dope Show is a program created by Alan Sherer in 1995 to teach students about alcohol and other drugs. The participants of this program are primarily middle school, junior high, and high school students. The show is usually presented to health classes and assemblies. Sherer has also presented to first time drug and/or alcohol offenders who have been required to attend The Dope Show by their school or by the court. The intended goal of this program is to effect behavioral and attitudinal change, reducing or eliminating the participants' use of drugs and alcohol.

Designed as a fast-paced quiz show, the format of the program allows Sherer, as the facilitator, to gauge what myths and false beliefs may be held by participants and encourage them to correct these throughout the show. The last portion of the show provides peer-to-peer interaction. Students ask one another questions based on the content of the show. Prizes are awarded for correct answers.

This interactive format is approximately two hours long. The program is tailored to the experience and age of the audience. The version intended for junior high students focuses mostly on marijuana, tobacco and alcohol. The version for older students addresses drugs such as heroin and amphetamines. When the audience is predominantly Latino, Sherer co-facilitates with an English-Spanish bi-lingual presenter.

This research summary compares The Dope Show to existing drug and alcohol programs for adolescents and provides recommendations for improvements.

Review of Existing Programs for Adolescents

In reviewing the current literature on drug and alcohol programs for adolescents, we found that most programs use a classroom learning environment and format to teach their message. Programs for adolescents usually rely on specialized classes facilitated by trained instructors (usually not in the same peer group), workbooks or paper assignments, and teaching aids such as films and group dialogue sessions (McBride et. al. 2004, Botvin et. al. 1990). Some of these classroom programs incorporate life skills training that teach the students how to resist drugs and alcohol, often providing practice in how to refuse drugs or alcohol. Some programs provide training in harm reduction. That is, what to do when in harmful drug and alcohol situations in order to promote safer drug use or drinking.

There are variations and factors amongst and within these programs that can make them more or less successful. For example, success is more likely when teaching methods are combined and presented by qualified trainers (peer or adult). Success is also more likely when the participants have adequate opportunities to practice their

new skills (Gottfredson & Wilson 2003, Cuijpers 2002). Peer-to-peer interactions are crucial for affecting behavioral change and having long-lasting affects (McBride, 2003).

The most successful programs incorporate adolescent drug and alcohol facilitators (Fried & Aronson 1995). It is the adolescents who are trained as leaders and facilitators who are most likely to change their drug and alcohol use behavior. While there are many ways to persuade or convince an adolescent to change their alcohol and other drug-use habits, one of the most successful and long-lasting is to create cognitive dissonance through the creation of leadership opportunities for adolescent participants. Cognitive dissonance is a concept grounded in the psychological literature that describes when a person has two conflicting ideas or values. In order to rectify the internal schism created by these ideas, the individual must change their behavior. In this case, adolescent facilitators must decide whether to (a) continue their drug and alcohol use or (b) reduce their use in order to make their behavior congruent with what they teach. Researchers have found that this form of cognitive dissonance drives behavioral change among adolescent leaders, mentors, and facilitators. In addition, adolescents in a leadership position gain more positive experiences in the program (Botvin et. al., 1990).

Summary and Recommendations

While reviewing drug and alcohol prevention, intervention, and education programs, we found that The Dope Show is a unique program. No other drug and alcohol program for adolescents boasts a format remotely similar to that of a quiz show.

We have not collected data that enables an analysis of participant outcomes. We nonetheless hypothesize that the current Dope Show format is successful because it teaches adolescents information about drugs and alcohol using a range of engaging methods by a skilled adult facilitator while also offering a peer-to-peer interaction.

At the same time, we predict that outcomes would be further improved by providing leadership opportunities for youth, such as the creation of youth co-facilitation position. Such leadership opportunities would further enhance peer-to-peer interaction as well as create the most conducive conditions for behavioral and attitudinal change.

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