

Working with Children: Programmes through Schools and Children's Clubs

As the group that is most vulnerable to be influenced by the environment and the exposure they get to alcohol use, children are a vital part of the alcohol prevention programme, it is necessary to describe prevention activities with children in detail. When planning work to be conducted with children in child clubs, schools, and other settings, it is important to design practical activities that are interesting to the children and would ensure their fullest corporation in producing the desired results. Here, using a varied approach could prove more successful. Planning is essential as by having an accurate knowledge of the specific changes aimed at, it is more likely that the programme will produce better results. The first step towards planning the programme activities is to identify the indicators that would be used to assess the progress of each activity. There are many different indicators of progress in preventing the spread of alcohol. Before discussing prevention activities for children, it is necessary to thoroughly understand the changes expected from such activities. Once this is has been done, the programme is more likely to proceed smoothly and to produce results effectively.

Desired Changes in Schools and Child Clubs

The list given below is not in any particular order of importance. It is solely intended to convey a basic idea of the mood that must be created within the community through the prevention programme ideally through consultation with all parties involved, especially children. The points listed below are categorized according to the changes expected to occur among children, among teachers and other staff at schools, and within the school environment.

- Expected changes among children

As a result of the programme, it is expected that the children:

- See the special rituals and antics of alcohol users as silly and a cause for amusement.
- Laugh (among themselves) at those who try to 'show off' their use of alcohol as something special or something to be proud of.
- Feel sorry for people who need alcohol to boost their image.
- Enjoy making fun of, or challenging people who try to show that they are enjoying life after having consumed alcohol.

- Understand how the use of alcohol is made to appear attractive, fashionable, stylish or pleasurable as shown in television dramas, songs, films, cartoons, magazines, and other media.
- Recognize how their less mature or more gullible friends are made to think highly of these substances through the above media.
- Explain to their less perceptive friends how they are being targeted by schemes to make an old fashioned and boring habit (i.e. alcohol use) appear exciting and fashionable to children / have the need to protect their more gullible friends from these vicious influences.
- Make jokes of and reduce the effect of the special words, jokes, rituals, and behaviours that are used to make alcohol appear magical and special.
- Learn to question the extent to which alcohol is actually wonderful and pleasurable and the reasons as to why people often have to be persuaded or even forced to continue using it.
- Become able to recognize that many of their older friends are merely pretending to enjoy alcohol either because they are fearful of showing that they do not like its effects or because they are afraid of being ridiculed by their peers.
- Question those who consume alcohol despite not seeming to enjoy its effects by asking them whether alcohol use is a sign of weakness rather than strength.
- Ridicule adults who use alcohol voluntarily because they would not dare to express the real discomfort they feel when using it
- Create their own words, jokes and remarks to counter those who are used to making these substances appear special.
- Are vigilant about teenagers and young adults who try to fool their less intelligent friends to join their groups and make them drink alcohol as a condition of membership.
- Label or coin negative names to refer to the traders and other agents who promote or sell alcohol – especially to their friends, parents, or relatives.
- Create their own forms of opposition to various entertainment events, parties, and other celebrations being organized to persuade people to consume alcohol.
- Develop ways to protest the use of alcohol use at events that are already enjoyable and entertaining by stating that alcohol only spoils their enjoyment at these events.

- Are sensitive to how some of their friends are made to see alcohol as a sign of being fashionable, 'cool', or 'macho'.
- Are careful about the numerous ways in which special occasions such as school events, trips, carnivals, celebrations, and sporting events are used to associate alcohol use with a mood of fun and enjoyment.
- Recognize the few individuals who make persistent attempts at promoting alcohol / understand the reasons behind their efforts, and counteract such influences.
- Join other children to ensure that every child in their class at school or play group will not fall prey to the varied subtle and crude tactics that are used to promote alcohol.
- Encourage those who experiment with alcohol to judge their effects based on their own experience rather than be forced to accept what other users tell them they should experience.
- Expected changes among teachers and other staff of schools, and adults in charge of child clubs

Expected change among the above in response to alcohol and the related behaviour include:

- Recognizing the influence that alcohol using colleagues may have in promoting a positive image of alcohol among children.
- Learning to ridicule and joke about the statements, actions, and various tactics used by colleagues who glorify the effects of alcohol.
- Directly confronting the attempts made by colleagues to attach fun and pleasure to alcohol. (These attempts may include the constant association of alcohol with social activities, trips and events – including those with students.)
- Developing their own vocabulary and other responses to counteract the sense of glamour and mystery attached to the use of alcohol (usually through the various assumptions, special words and rituals that glorify alcohol use).
- Being vigilant about how the trade of alcohol attempts to reach children through messages, and images, the association of alcohol with fame (through celebrities) and/or sexuality, and certain situations and objects that make the use of alcohol look fashionable and rebellious.
- Learning ways of helping children associate alcohol with weakness, gullibility, the inability to achieve one's goals, and the lack of self-confidence.

- Strengthening children who are insecure or have a poor opinion of themselves to improve their self image and self esteem, so that they do not feel the need use alcohol to compensate for their perceived inadequacies.
 - Becoming sensitive to the ways in which the promotion of alcohol is discreetly carried out by various forces, such as hidden paid agents, within the community. (The discreet promotion of alcohol includes ‘market research’, musical and dance events, competitions, private parties, and images in entertainment programmes freely broadcasted through the mass media).
 - Explaining to children the way the above forces operate and how to protect themselves and their less perceptive friends from their influences.
 - Addressing people whose use of alcohol indirectly promotes the substance among children. (This should be done with the aim of to stopping these practices).
 - Getting the involvement of alcohol users in cooperating with the school to reduce the attractiveness of alcohol and to counteract the methods used to create this sense of attractiveness.
 - Demonstrating how those who use alcohol regularly most often feel uneasy and uncomfortable (in that they spend most of their time anxiously awaiting for the brief relief of the next glass of alcohol).
 - (In the case of teachers and other members of staff who habitually drink alcohol) Feeling embarrassed about and negatively viewing their use of alcohol, even if they may still continue using it.
- Expected changes in the environment of schools/child clubs

Expected changes in the above include:

- The premises of the school/child club look clean with no objects connected to alcohol, such as empty bottles and beer cans, to be seen littering the area.
- Traders in the locality are reluctant and embarrassed to sell alcohol in the vicinity of the school even to adults.
- Local traders who sell alcohol address representatives of the alcohol trade at every opportunity requesting them to block the various subtle means by which children may be influenced to drink. (It is also important that local traders are sincere in these efforts).

- The sale and promotion of alcohol in the vicinity of the school/child club diminishes.
- Those who previously flaunted their use of alcohol, especially in areas near the school/child club, are now nervous that children will view them negatively and ridicule them.
- Alcohol users would not display their use of alcohol or the alleged “drunken behaviour” near the school/child club for fear of being laughed at or ridiculed.
- Parents and other adults associated with the school (such as those serving food at the school canteen or the security guards) reduce their own use of alcohol or quit using it completely.
- Most members of the community talk of the school/child club positively and have a good impression of the children’s activities in changing the school/child club and its environment.
- The manner in which people in the locality use and talk about alcohol has become more subdued.
- Those involved in the use and trade of alcohol, are irritated with the school’s/child club’s activities.
- Some users team up with those involved in the alcohol trade and their agents, to publicly criticize the activities that the school/child club is undertaking.
- Alcohol users are reluctant to talk about their habits to students of the school/members of the child club for fear of being ridiculed or challenged.
- The number of outlets that sell alcohol in the vicinity of the school/child club is steadily decreasing.
- Individuals working within the community to promote alcohol through various means such as TV programmes, films, entertainment activities, novels, and websites are aware and dislike the activities of the school/child club and have been addressed by the children (who attend the school/child club).
- The positive manner in which alcohol is spoken of diminishes among families of students of the school/members of the child club.
- Parents take an increasing interest in counteracting the commercial influences that subtly promote alcohol especially among children.
- Those politicians or law enforcement authorities who support the spread of licit and illicit alcohol trade consider the school/child club a problem.

Understanding the Basics

The above lists indicate the changes desired in schools or child clubs that would start the process of successfully countering the spread of alcohol use. There are some common factors underlying these changes that when understood, make it easier to identify the other necessary changes that should be created in the community. A few important points to be followed in this process are as follows.

- Develop an understanding on the methods (intentional and unintentional) used to promote alcohol. This understanding must be conveyed to all children in the group being worked with.
- Implement creative and interesting activities to prevent or counteract the methods used to promote alcohol. Children who are more active could be involved assigned to lead such activities.
- Work towards reversing the idea that alcohol is special, magical, and highly pleasurable. Those who perceive alcohol and its effects as unpleasant or uninteresting should be allowed to voice their opinion as well.

Children should be encouraged and motivated to act independently in taking the lead to create the desired changes within their community. To make actions efficient, children, teachers, other school staff, and adults in charge of children's clubs should develop a system of regularly checking the progress of the prevention activities and assessing whether the changes listed above are gradually being accomplished.

Planning

There are simple procedures to follow in planning an action. A good method of planning is to begin by considering each of the desired changes and working backwards until the most suitable areas in which to start working have been found. The following are three simple yet important questions to consider in this process.

1. What is the ultimate change (final goal) to be achieved within the community?
2. What preceding changes will lead to the ultimate change, and what will lead to those preceding changes?
3. Which changes, from the abovementioned preceding changes, could be worked with immediately?

The easiest process in selecting the changes to be worked with would be to take one of the items from the list of desired changes drawn up at the initiation of the programme and apply it to these three questions, starting with the third question and working backwards to the ultimate change or final goal until the factors that contribute to it are determined. It must be noted that the factors chosen to work with should be realistic and practical. The following section further expands on this.

Understanding the Desired Results and Creating an Action Plan

In working out an effective action plan, it is necessary to develop a deep, thorough understanding of the desired results. For example, one may take the first item listed in the section “Expected changes among children” above which states that children “see the special rituals and antics of alcohol users as silly and a cause for amusement”. Here, it is expected that children will gradually cease to see alcohol as special, exhilarating or exciting and begin to see its use as an old fashioned and outdated habit that is kept alive though the efforts of some people who to make it look special. It is also expected that children will no longer be deceived by the various unique words, rituals and other factors used to build up an exciting image of alcohol.

One way of achieving this result is to help children to understand, through discussions and practical activities that the “special” actions of alcohol users (such as words and rituals), although taken very seriously by the latter, are in reality rather silly. When children find that these actions are in no way remarkable, they are less likely to see them as special.

Determining the Contributing Factors

In initiating the prevention programme in the community, an important step that must be taken is the determining of the factors that lead to the desired outcome. When taking the consumption of alcohol, the act of drinking the alcohol from a glass, can, or bottle, in itself may not at present be seen by the majority as ridiculous. Yet, the prevention programme should aim mainly at creating the view that drinking alcohol is ridiculous and absurd among members of the community. In doing this it is essential to identify the changes that must first occur in order to create this final result and what factors would lead the community to view the act of drinking alcohol as ridiculous and senseless. Several reference points or indicators by which the changes in the people’s views can be measured should then be drawn up. Examples of these are the number of people claiming that drinking alcohol is a display of stupidity or the number of people in public places that laugh whenever they see a person in the act of drinking. The next step is to identify the factors that lead to these indicators and to persist in working backwards until a primary indicator or desired goal that could be used as a starting point is reached.

A similar system of analysis can be applied to the various rituals associated with the serving and drinking of alcohol as a group or at a social gathering. By identifying each of the factors regarding alcohol and alcohol consumption, an analysis could be carried out as shown above by which the community, especially the children, could be guided to observe the different ways in which alcohol is perceived and consumed. They could be shown that alcohol has a special set of rituals to develop a particular image and set of expectations regarding it, indicating that drinking it is an exceptional activity. They could then be guided to questioning these rituals.

Engaging in this type of analysis may extend over a considerable period of time during which it is not unexpected that new ideas would emerge. For example, while analyzing the nature of substance use in the community, it may come to light that children may learn to perceive the use of alcohol as natural and desirable if they frequently witness the use of alcohol by adults in their households or by popular celebrities who frequently appear in the print and electronic media. It is also possible to observe that adults and children who are more gullible are more likely to be impressed by the rituals surrounding alcohol use or that those children and youth who are least aware of the actual effects of alcohol are more likely to initiate its use by imitating the actions of celebrities.

During the course of the alcohol prevention programme it is necessary to make the image of alcohol use less appealing to the community, especially the children. This should be done by taking the easiest possible approach towards changing the existing mindset. For instance, it is easy for children to ridicule or see as an object of pity, a peer who imitates a film star who drinks alcohol. Other ideas may also be developed along the same lines. For example, if done as a group, simply observing a person drinking alcohol in public could be amusing and encouraging children to engage in such observations alone may be sufficient to achieve the desired results.

Deciding on the Necessary Actions

Once the path that must be taken to work towards the final goal has been decided on, it is possible to identify the steps that could be worked on immediately. Children may not be amused at the particular rituals and customs associated with the use of substances initially, but this could be achieved by working systematically on the factors that would eventually lead to this final result. A drastic change may not be obvious during the early stages of the programme. However, during these stages, even slight progress along the lines of the desired results is sufficient.

Following the identification of the changes desired through the programme and the factors that contribute to them, the next step is to strategically spread the ideas such as, “young people who use alcohol to imitate celebrities should be pitied rather than admired” and “people drink to hide their weaknesses”. The children selected and trained to take preventive action within their community would find this strategy enjoyable and are likely to participate with enthusiasm. They should be taught that even small actions such as simply staring at those who publicly drink and flaunt their glasses/cans of alcohol could contribute greatly in progressing towards the ultimate goal.

If the children’s group persists in its activities, it is possible to expect that other members of the community, especially children, would also eventually begin to view alcohol use as ridiculous. Further, if children repeatedly mention the absurdity of using alcohol in the presence of the users, it could be expected that the users too would begin to feel ashamed of and attempt to abandon their use of alcohol. The children’s group could also play a vital role in assisting other, more vulnerable and insecure children to develop self confidence so as to be able to join in the prevention activities and to resist the temptation to experiment with alcohol later in life.

While, the above analysis focused solely on the first item in the list, “Expected changes among children”, a similar analysis could be carried out for all of the other desired changes as well. As the prevention plan is intended to be a long term strategy, the inability to achieve major results immediately should not be seen as a failure. It is important to be persistent in the various strategies employed in the programme until it is possible to determine those that best suit the community and then persistently work on the selected strategies towards a gradual change.

At the completion of the time period allocated for the prevention programme, the progress achieved with children could be measured according to the indicators shown below.

Some Indicators for Children’s Groups

1. The ability to view the use of alcohol as foolish
2. The development of a proper understanding of the tactics used through the media and other means to advertise alcohol and the ability to avoid being influenced by these tactics
3. The ability to view with contempt and ridicule everything that promotes the use of alcohol among children
4. The extent to which children attempt to have a positive influence within the home in spreading proper knowledge regarding the use of alcohol and other substances
5. The ability to question the behaviours that promote the use of alcohol
6. The extent to which children strive to educate peers who possess a limited understanding on alcohol prevention
7. The level of participation with other children as a group in advocacy activities

For further details contact;

Shakya Nanayakkara

Secretary General, Healthy Lanka

+94 773786788

shakya@healthylanka.lk

