

EPIDEMIC . . .

No. 1 Straight talk about kids, drugs and families from Straight, Inc.

DENIAL

"In understanding the drug problem and in understanding Straight's role in dealing with that problem, we must understand that the single, biggest problem we have to confront is denial.

Individuals, families, communities, the media, and all the institutions of our society conspire inadvertently not to know how serious the drug abuse problem is. The fact is, as many of you bear witness having been personally touched by drug abuse, we are as a nation in trouble. Drug abuse prevention is a matter of survival for our families, for our communities, and for our nation. To underestimate that threat and to see drug abuse as a temporary, minor or fadish trend is to miss the central reality of the drug problem. I am going to give you just a few statistics, not to burden you but to help us understand the dimensions of the drug problem. In the 20th century in the United States, every age segment of our population has gotten healthier from one decade to the next with one exception: America's teenagers, 15 to 24, are now dying at a roughly 16% greater rate than they were in 1960. No other age segment of our population in the entire 20th Century has ever had a rising death rate. These young people — the future of our nation — are dying primarily in motor vehicle acci-

dents, suicides and homicides. These causes of death have been called "victimless" but they are more realistically seen as disorders of self-control or social control. They are all powerfully related to drug abuse"....."To be blunt, I have spent fifteen years working in

"... Straight is the best drug abuse treatment program I have seen, anywhere."

the drug abuse field, traveling to more than 20 countries and visiting hundreds of prevention programs. Straight, Inc. is the best drug abuse treatment program I have seen, anywhere. Lest there be any doubt that this is an accolade I have bestowed easily or casually, I can tell you that I have not said that about any other program."

The above quotation is excerpted from a presentation by Robert L. Dupont, M.D., President of the American Council on Marijuana, Inc., given at the First Annual Awareness Banquet, Straight, Inc. Atlanta, October 17, 1981.

(Cont. on pg. 2)



STRAIGHT
A Direction for Youth



***A message from
William D. Oliver,
Executive Director***

Straight, Inc. was formed in 1976 by a group of Florida parents who became frightened by what they saw happening to their children in the early '70s. Drug experimentation was rampant. Marijuana could be easily bought at schools. Medical studies linking drug use to serious ailments of the lungs, heart and brain were being published. This group of concerned and involved parents laid the groundwork for what Straight has become in the '80s — a nationally recognized drug treatment program for adolescents.

We've been writing the book as we go along — taking the best from other programs, enhancing our successes, learning from our mistakes and helping thousands of children, their families and communities fight this national epidemic. For it is an EPIDEMIC and parents and communities MUST get involved to fight its spread. We're

(Cont. on pg. 3)

What is denial?

In general terms, denial is a psychological mechanism or process by which human beings protect themselves from something threatening to them by blocking knowledge of that thing from their awareness. It is an unconscious process which can be seen, for example, when a person is suffering from an obviously terminal illness, but seems to be genuinely unaware of that fact. It is a buffer against unacceptable reality.¹

With drug using teenagers and their parents, denial takes many forms and involves the whole family. A child will simply deny taking part in the activity he is accused of, even with abundant evidence to the contrary. Or a parent will minimize the problem, saying "he's ONLY drinking a little beer — it could be worse". Or other things will be blamed for the problem — trouble at school, peer pressure, "he's going through a phase". In many instances the teenager will turn hostile, becoming angry and irritable when approached about his actions. This is an effective form of denial, as people will tend to drop a subject that repeatedly brings an angry response.

Denial in its many forms is an automatic and usually unconscious act. And it is progressive, with the lies, alibis and excuses becoming more pervasive and part of the teenager's, and families, daily lives. An elaborate system of defenses shields the family from what is really happening.

How Straight Deals with Denial

Overcoming denial is the first step a family must take on the road to recovery. Unfortunately, the hard truth of the situation is usually brought home by a crisis — the child is being held by the police; the hospital calls with a report of an overdose, etc. It's at this point the

parents realize that things are out of hand and they need help. At Straight, the first step for parents is to attend an open meeting. There they are introduced to the program as well as to kids and parents who are successfully dealing with the problem. It's a very important step to realize that what is happening to your family is not your fault, it's not a moral problem or a sin and, most importantly, you're not alone.

At the open meeting parents are also introduced to the hard truths of teenage drug use. Most parents have a traditional image of the "drug addict" as the hardcore heroin user seen sprawled on the streets of big city slums. At Straight, parents are shown that drug using teenagers are psychologically dependent on the drugs they do — they "need" to get high. And their drug use will progress as this need becomes more important in their lives. Their drug use becomes a "habit" because of a psychological need, not a physical one. Most parents have not recognized the symptoms of drug use in their child — because they don't know what to look for, they don't want to know, or they choose not to know. Like we said, the denial system is pervasive. But it must be overcome, for denial perpetuates and accelerates the illness of drug use. You wouldn't knowingly ignore a cancer growing inside your child, and teenage drug use is the most frightening "cancer" affecting our children today.

The first step in overcoming denial in the teenager begins with the intake process. Most teenagers will not voluntarily admit themselves to a drug treatment program — after all, they're "in control" of their drug use, all their friends do drugs, etc. So they are brought to the program by their parents. The child fully intends to "con" everyone and be back with his or her friends soon. At Straight, peer pressure, which got them on drugs, is used to get them off.

During the intake process, the teenager meets in a room with other teenagers who discuss their own drug use. These are teenagers who are farther along in the pro-

gram and have used and experienced the same drugs as the child — and they can't be "conned" because they've been there themselves. It's kids relating to kids.

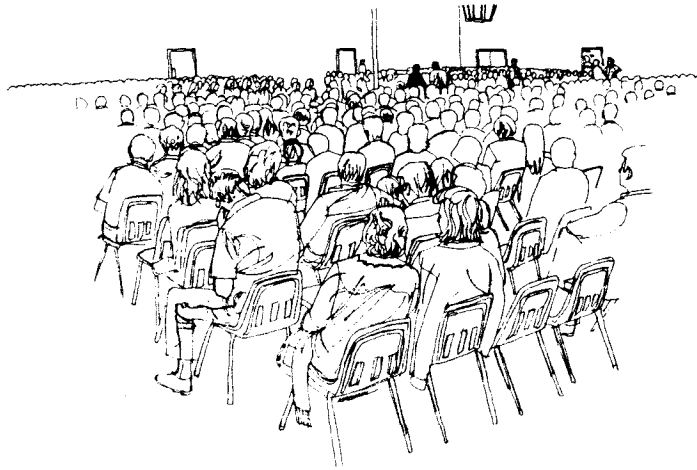
They talk about the past, they talk about being honest, they talk about the consequences of drug use — on family, friends, health. An important step comes when they talk about recognizing what they really "need", not what they "want." Once this distinction is made, the drug using teenager, who still "wants" to do drugs, is brought to admit that he or she may "need" help. Once there's that crack in the denial system, recovery has begun.

The intake process is of course only a first step. The denial system is still firmly entrenched and the drug using teenager still believes he can "con" his way out. As he or she becomes involved in the First Phase of the Straight program, this denial is gradually broken down. The feelings of shame and guilt, which had been "medicated" by the drug use, are brought to the surface. Through peer pressure, the teenager becomes more honest with his feelings and more honest with those around him. He is encouraged by his peers to relate his experiences and fears — and no one can see through a teenager's lies like another teenager. They'll tell him "you're not being honest — what did you really feel?" or "don't con us — we see right through you". These group raps are a daily occurrence at Straight during the entire program, with family raps, sibling raps and open meetings reinforcing the process. This entire program is supervised by qualified professionals and if individual counselling is needed it also is readily available.

The denial system is hard to break through. We've had teenagers in Fourth Phase, after months in the program, say that they only just realized how much trouble they were really in. That's months of therapy just to admit "I have a problem." But that first step must be taken.

¹ "Dealing with Denial", The Caring Community Series, No. 6, Hazelden Foundation, Inc., Center City, MN, 1975, pg. 9.

Why Straight Works



(William D. Oliver, from pg. 1)

publishing this monthly newsletter as a service to parents, educators and communities everywhere to help families deal with the epidemic and recover from the tragedy of drug using children. We've gained a lot of information in our years of dealing with the teenage drug user and it's our hope that by sharing this information we'll help fight this problem nationwide. We'll talk about all aspects of drug use — how it affects the child, his parents and siblings — what to look for, how to know and what to do. This issue deals with denial — what has been called the single biggest problem we have to confront concerning drug use. We'll talk about the program at Straight, how and why it works. And we'll bring you first-person accounts from young people and their parents, telling you what happened to them and letting you know that you're not alone.

Hopefully, your children will never need the Straight program. But the hard evidence of reality tells us that this will happen only if you are concerned, involved and knowledgeable. It's our goal to help you achieve this. We're here to help — with information, with support, with experience. And with a record of success that makes every day a joy to experience and every family a living testimony to the benefits of drug-free living. We consider our children part of our national heritage and are prepared to fight hard for each and every individual child and family.

Straight has been recognized by the experts as an adolescent drug treatment program unique in its achievements. Straight has succeeded time and time again where other approaches have failed. Why? What makes us so different? There are many reasons, but chief among them are the following:

1. Straight deals with the disease, not the symptoms. Adolescent drug use in its various stages, is an illness, a disease. It is contagious, it is the cause of symptoms, it gets worse without treatment, it can be deadly, it is very treatable but, you must treat the disease not the symptoms. Drug use by adolescents is the primary problem. It causes bad behavior, poor attitudes, turmoil, confusion, and wild mood swings. Our approach is to go right to the heart. Our message is that you are not a bad person because of the things you have done. You are a good person in bad trouble because of the drugs you have done. We deal with the real problem.

2. Straight is specifically aimed at the adolescent drug user. It is a fact that teen-agers are not adults. Theirs' is a world all its own. That's why treating teen-age drug problems with adult techniques or programs just does not work. Teen-agers not only have their drug use to overcome; they also have growing up and maturing to deal with. That just doesn't happen in four or five weeks. We know kids and there is no quick fix for immaturity.

3. Straight works with the entire family. Adolescent drug use is a disease which affects that entire family. Therefore, the entire family must work at the problem. Mom, Dad, brothers and sisters all participate in the wonderful process of recovery. It's not all fun, but then neither is life. It is all worth the winning.

4. Straight is based on a value system which for thousands of years has worked. It is based on such bedrocks as honesty, integrity, openness, love, communication, and commitment. It is based on hopes, dreams, ambitions, and just plain determination.

5. Straight works because we believe in courage and anticipate the miracle of change, the ability to rise from that which they are, to that which they may become. We have, in each facility, an atmosphere which permits change, and indeed encourages it. The real key to young people is to realize that they have a unique capacity to change and that the one who succeeds is the one who is able to tap that capacity for change and challenge the young person to seek a higher goal.

These are just a few of the reasons Straight works. There are others; the medical and professional staff, the young people, the parents, the families, the care, the commitment, and the determination to win.

At the bottom line is some age old wisdom . . . faith, hope and love . . . and the greatest of these is love.

Coupon

EPIDEMIC is published monthly by Straight, Inc. as a community service. If you'd like to help, a \$10 donation will be applied to a one year subscription.

- Enclosed is my \$10 donation.
- Please send me information on Straight, Inc.
- Please add the following name to your EPIDEMIC mailing list.



One mother's story

John and I worked hard to bring our children up right. We taught them to know right from wrong and to respect the teachings of our church. Honesty and respect were extremely important virtues in our home. We trusted our children and felt that the basic honesty we had instilled would always keep them out of trouble. Once we started our family, John and I found that we really didn't want to maintain the social life we had had. We spent more and more time doing family things. Those were extremely happy years.

The first intimation of trouble came when Alex was graduating from 8th grade. He was invited to a party at the home of a school friend. Alex smelled strongly of beer when John picked him up that night. We then learned that the "adult supervision" had been an 18 year old sister. Alex swore that he had not been drinking but had been sprayed by a beer bottle that another person had been shaking. Alex begged John not to tell me. He swore it would never happen again.

John and I didn't even know what chemical dependency was at that time. We knew about skid row

bums and heroin addicts, but no one in either of our families had ever had a problem with alcohol. John thought that this was just adolescent experimentation and high spirits. And he didn't tell me.

During Alex' high school years we both had experiences which we did not share with the other. John found a can of beer under the seat of the car. Alex said he had taken it away from a friend. I found some strange seeds in the pocket of Alex' jeans. But we reassured ourselves. Alex was so careful of his appearance. He was so polite that all adults loved him. This was not the kind of kid who takes drugs. He was a health nut, lifting weights, careful of his diet. I was convinced that he would never abuse his body with drugs.

But incidents kept happening. After a senior trip we were notified by the school that Alex was suspended for doing drugs on the bus. Alex told us that all he had done was "drink a little beer." It was the rest of the group who were "doing drugs."

But feeling very guilty for invading his privacy, John and I searched Alex' room. We had

heard of the clever places. In the speaker of his stereo we found seeds, in a puzzle box from some magic tricks we found a small pipe with some strange smelling "tobacco" in it. Alex explained away our fears. Lockers were being searched in school and a friend had asked Alex to keep the things, because "everyone knew" that Alex did not do drugs.

I expect you are asking yourself how parents could be so blind. I ask myself the same thing as I look back. But then . . . we just couldn't believe it could happen to our family.

John wanted to enroll Alex in a treatment program, but I wasn't ready. Alex wrecked his car. Still I wasn't ready. Alex wrecked one of our cars. Not yet. We found that he had substituted colored water in our liquor bottles. Finally, after Alex passed out in the hallway, I was ready.

Can you imagine my astonishment and horror when, after Alex was admitted to the program, we learned the list of drugs he had been doing for the past four years. Not just pot and alcohol as we believed. But pot, alcohol, hash, hash oil, Tai stick (whatever that is), Rush, LSD, inhalants of all kinds, and every kind of prescription medication he could get his hands on.

PARENT POINTER:

If you think your child is only doing "a little pot" or "he drinks once in awhile" you are probably seeing only the tip of the iceberg.

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