

## Parents band together to push back drug tide - Preventing Drug Abuse: What's New, What's Working. Second of a series.

*Christian Science Monitor, The (Published as Christian Science Monitor, The (Boston, MA)) - May 4, 1982*

- Author/Byline: Hilary DeVries, Staff correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor
- Edition: Midwestern Edition
- Section: Pg. 12

A mother stands in the lobby, gently rocking from foot to foot. She stares out the window, occasionally looking around nervously. Her disheveled hair accentuates her uneasiness. Suddenly, a lanky dark-haired boy lopez into the hall. Grinning, he grabs his mother and shouts out, "I love you, Mom."

When alone again, the woman says, "It's not so long ago that he didn't even want to touch me.'

Just a few months before, in fact, Dave had been hooked on a smorgasbord of "grass" (marijuana), uppers (stimulants), downers (depressants), and other drugs. But today the once-haggard teen-ager is reestablishing ties with his mother as well as with himself

Emotional scenes like this are played out daily at Straight Inc., a private drug rehabilitation center on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, Fla. Every year hundreds of parents bring their sons and daughters to this white cinderblock building to detoxify them (wean them from their drug use) and repair relationships torn apart by drug abuse.

Founded four years ago by a group of concerned parents, the center symbolizes the extent to which many families are going today to thwart the burgeoning problem of drug abuse.

Parents are launching a living-room revolt against one of US society's most stubborn problems. Their efforts range from a few families getting together to share ordeals and ideas to setting up sophisticated treatment centers. Mothers and fathers are patrolling playgrounds to stop students from passing "joints" (marijuana cigarettes). They are publishing pamphlets on the hazards of cocaine or marijuana. They are knocking on lawmakers' doors seeking tougher laws.

This motley army of outraged parents is taking aim at all aspects of the problem: prevention, enforcement, treatment. At least 3,000 parent groups have sprung up across the country. Others are being formed almost daily. Two years ago they established their own national alliance--the National Federation of Parents for Drug Free Youth (NFP)--which claims 18,000 names on its mailing list. In addition, they have the support of First Lady Nancy Reagan and the White House. The National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) has long trumpeted their cause. "The parent groups are the best thing I've seen in five years," says NIDA's former director, Dr. Robert L. DuPont.

In some regions these grass-roots groups have become potent political forces, lobbying for stiffer drug laws and trying to close down "head shops" (stores selling various drug paraphernalia, such as pipes, cigarette paper, etc.). To many experts, these groups are at the cutting edge of the drug-prevention movement

But other outsiders worry that some groups, in their zeal to stamp out drug abuse, are overstepping their bounds. They worry that the moral outrage being expressed toward the drug problem could result in legislative codes that are too broad. Indeed, some critics pass the parent groups off as bands of right-wing zealots bent on seeing their morals become law

"I have mixed feelings about the parent movement," says Peter Bell, executive director of the Minnesota Institute on Black Chemical Abuse. "The danger is that they seek simplified answers to a complicated problem, for instance, their push to eliminate drug paraphernalia. Their efforts may lull the public into complacency, a thinking that drug abuse can be wiped out simply at home.'

Even stronger concern is voiced by Prof. David Lewis, chairman of the community health department at the Brown University Medical School. "I'm worried that the parents (may) acquire a search-and-destroy mentality," he cautions. "I think in some states their leadership is very hard line and that they are actually overreacting. . . .'

Yet the legions of grass-roots parent groups say staunchly that they believe they are making a crucial difference in an area where little has been done. Collectively, they have targeted 8--to 13-year-olds as being most receptive to parental guidance. "If we can influence these kids," says NFP president Bill Barton, "then in four years we will see a real turnaround."

A number of local efforts already are proving successful. Straight Inc., for instance, claims that 80 percent of the drug-problem children who walk through its doors leave free of addiction. That's one of highest success rates of any drug treatment facility in the country. The group takes in an average of 30 teen-agers a month. Treatment length varies, but generally lasts at least a year. Some of the youths work into staff positions and stay on

The program's methods, drawing heavily upon stiff peer pressure, strong family involvement, and Alcoholics Anonymous-type techniques of self-confrontation and strong group support, are controversial. The center is run like a boot camp, with tight discipline and few freedoms

for those who enroll. During the first phase of treatment, the kids are even taken from their parents and placed in homes with other kids in the program. During the day, when nonstop "rap" sessions go on for nearly 14 hours, the counselors, who are graduates of the program, never let the kids out of their sight, literally holding onto them by the seat of their pants. Administrators say this is a small price to pay for a changed life style

The children themselves seem to agree. "Before I came here, I had nothing," said one earnest-faced former addict. "But now I have my life and my family back."

Parents obviously agree. They come from as far away as Virginia to enroll their children, returning at least once a month for required visits. In addition, the parents must agree to limit their own drug and alcohol use during their child's treatment

Straight Inc. has opened five similar centers in Florida and two other states in the past year. Two more will open soon, and administrators are aggressively seeking funds for a planned staff-training center in St. Petersburg. They estimate they will treat some 7,000 drug-addicted youths in the next five years

Straight Inc. is really a last resort for many parents with children who are heavy drug users--the kind who are already under the influence of drugs when they enter their school classrooms in the morning. Many of the youths brought here already have been in jail. Most have tried running away. Some have threatened their parents with violence. And while most of the kids in the program are high-school students, Straight has taken drug-using children as young as 12

Other parents around the country are looking for answers to drug problems as well. One of the chief organizers in the grass-roots drug-prevention movement is Marsha Suchard, a vivacious mother of three and a professor of English literature at Georgia State University

Dr. Suchard was one of the original parents to raise a red flag about marijuana use among teen-agers, back in 1977. Marijuana decriminalization hearings were raging on Capitol Hill and in her view NIDA was less than emphatic in its condemnation of the drug. Dr. Suchard, who had witnessed profound and disturbing changes in her own children when they smoked marijuana, wrote what she calls "the original mad mother letter" to then NIDA director DuPont

That letter struck home, and Dr. DuPont paid Dr. Suchard and her children a visit. Not only had Dr. Suchard gotten her own children to quit using drugs by forming a "parent peer-pressure group," she was also willing to write a book on her efforts. NIDA was anxious to see if such an unorthodox approach would work for others

The booklet, "Parents, Peers, and Pot," became a NIDA best seller and spawned parent group after parent group. The Suchard secret to success? "We did everything against the advice of the professionals. Everyone at that time said, 'Kids make their own decisions, that marijuana was not addictive, that responsible use of marijuana by juveniles was possible, that it was too repressive to try to get your kid off drugs, and that every parent who was a social drinker was a hypocrite.'" To all that, Dr. Suchard replied, "No."

After getting together with other parents in her Atlanta neighborhood, Dr. Suchard and friends drew up a "code" of nondrug behavior. Specifically, they encouraged each other to spend more time with their children, talk with them about their problems, get to know their friends, and make sure all their group activities were supervised by an informed adult. Also clear-cut rules regarding curfews, homework, and even manners were emphasized

Acting more on instinct than expertise, the Suchard group seemed unlikely to succeed. But not only did most of the children shrug off drugs within three months, they continued to stay "straight" through the rest of school. One other result: Some younger brothers and sisters also steered clear of drugs

The idea caught on elsewhere. After adopting similar techniques, nearby Dublin, Ga., claimed its juvenile drug use was more than halved, dropping from 70 percent to 30 percent. And one local high school found that the uniform behavior code had a big impact on many 16-year-olds - the toughest peer group to crack. "Professional opinion said that after 15 years of age, you couldn't get to them," laughs Dr. Suchard. "Well, what were we supposed to do, throw them away?"

Yet many community groups are turning their gaze beyond what children smoke in the school restrooms. Also targeted in their antidrug drives are the growing number of shops that sell drug paraphernalia. The aim: pass legislation to close them down

"We zeroed in on the most obvious do-drug message - paraphernalia," says Georgia housewife Sue Rusche

Like Dr. Suchard, Mrs. Rusche was stirred to action back in the late 1970s. When five head shops opened in the same year that drug abuse killed a local university student in the Atlanta area, conservative De Kalb County, Ga., was shaken. It didn't take long for anti-paraphernalia proposals to hit the desks of county commissioners and state legislators. By 1978 Georgia had passed the first anti-paraphernalia laws in the country. "We hit the maps with that one," says Mrs. Rusche. "Calls came in from all over the country." Federal hearings followed. In 1979, the Drug Enforcement Administration wrote a model paraphernalia law that makes the manufacture, distribution, and sale of drug paraphernalia a state criminal offense

Since then 25 states have adopted similar measures. Yet many of the ordinances are being challenged in court by paraphernalia manufacturers. However, because of a recent US Supreme Court ruling upholding the rights of communities to enact such legislation, the

sale of drug paraphernalia is "no longer an issue," according to Mrs. Rusche

Now, the energetic Rusche is organizing committees to track drug-related legislation and court cases. One local parent group in De Kalb County, Families in Action, publishes a newsletter on such developments. Rusche's latest crusade is the debate over marijuana's alleged beneficial medical uses

Another powerful and successful community group is Naples (Fla.) Informed Parents (NIP), founded by NFP president Barton and his wife. A large, relaxed man who describes himself as pure "middle America," Mr. Barton banded together with other parents four years ago to try to root drugs out of the schools in their wealthy and well-manicured community in southwest Florida

After some initial resistance from school officials, NIP members went to the sheriff's office. What they got was an unmarked van stationed in the high school parking lot to take photographs of any drug dealing. School administrators, not to mention many students and parents, were angered at what they saw as "big brother" tactics. Later, most agreed there was a drug problem. The result was an antidrug program that was rigorous--and still controversial in some quarters--and included

\* Updating the school conduct code to include a dress code, clarify student rules, and address the drug situation. The new document was sent home with each child and published in the local newspaper.

\* Requiring parents to make daily phone calls to check on students who might be "skipping" school. This got parents talking to other parents. In addition it increased attendance rates 10 percent

\* Installing "deputies" in the high school. These volunteers from the sheriff's office were expected to improve relations between students and local law-enforcement officials

\* Tightening school discipline. Stiffer rules were adopted regarding on-campus drug use--and enforced. First-time offenders drew three-day suspensions. A second violation brought expulsion.

\* Establishing parent peer-pressure groups to watch students outside of class

While student reactions at first were negative, drug use in Naples High School has been "drastically reduced," Barton says. "I am not so naive as to think that drug-taking overall dropped," he admits. "But if we could block out one chunk of time, the hours spent in school, that could be relatively drug free, we are going a long way in the right direction.'

Deerfield, Ill., has also enlisted some unusual tactics in its war on drugs. Located on Chicago's North Shore, Deerfield is a gracious and affluent bedroom community that quickly stirred to life a few year ago when word spread of rising juvenile delinquency involving drug use in the town. Parents attacked the problem by first going after vandals

A local ordinance was passed making parents directly responsible for any property damage up to \$500. Vandalism dropped 39 percent in two years. Town fathers then extended the parental responsibility idea to illegal drug use. The parents of a juvenile convicted of possessing even small amounts of marijuana could be fined \$500 and the child recommended to a supervision or probation program. Drug violations dropped more than 20 percent in the first two years. Further declines were reported later. One parent described the ordinances as "hitting the parent's pocketbooks and that hits close to home.'

Today Deerfield has 65 local ordinances relating to juvenile offenses. But the consensus is that ordinances alone won't make the difference. Community support will. From an initial parent group, school district policies on drug and alcohol use have been strengthened. A Deerfield Youth Panel, consisting of local students, has been formed as a peer support system. A class in drug abuse, treatment, and prevention is offered as part of the high school curriculum. Some students have traveled to other communities to talk on the town's approach. The effect of the one class, according to one observer, has been a "real change of atmosphere" in the entire school.

Next: Drug abuse in business and the military

Where to write for further informatio

National Institute on Drug Abuse 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, Md. 2085

PRIDE Parents Resources and Information on Drug Education Georgia State University University Plaza Atlanta, Ga. 3030

ACTION Drug Use Prevention Program 806 Connecticut Ave. NW Washington, D.C. 2052

National Federation of Parents for Drug-Free Youth 9805 Dameron Drive Silver Spring, Md. 2090

Channel One Clearinghouse Corporation Box 8, Lanesville Station Gloucester, Mass. 0193

Straight Inc. Box 40052 St. Petersburg, Fla. 33743

- Caption: Picture, no caption, By Gordon N. Converse, chief photographer

- *Dateline: St. Petersburg, Fla.*
- *Record: 13E20F610EF9ADE0*
- *Copyright: Copyright (c) 1982 The Christian Science Monitor (www.CSMonitor.com). For re-use permissions, please contact [copyright@csps.com](mailto:copyright@csps.com)*