

## Puppet play as interactive approach in drug abuse prevention

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**Abstract:** The national strategies of drug abuse prevention across Europe have come to recognise that the drugs abuse problem presents a complex set of issues of which there is no simple solution. There is a considerable increase in investment in prevention, treatment and harm-reduction activities and increased focus on supply reduction. School settings are the focus of most attempts to implement effective prevention programmes. Prevention in schools does not only focus on drugs alone, but also includes personal and social skills, often with family involvement and involvement of local community. The school is an ideal setting for drug abuse prevention and development of active and responsible attitudes against drug abuse. Successful school drug-prevention programmes include personal skills training (decision-making, coping and goal-setting), social skills training (assertiveness, resisting peer-pressure), drug education (knowledge about drugs and the consequences of taking them) and developing attitudes (especially correcting misconceptions about peer group drug use). Effective drug education programmes incorporate a range of activities which provide students with relevant factual information, the opportunity to consider their attitudes and values, and the values of others. For effective delivery of prevention programmes, interactive teaching is better than didactic teaching alone. In that sense, the puppet play could be used as an interactive technique. Puppets help the students engage actively in communicating their emotions, opinions and experiences, and learn about the drug abuse problem. By the means of puppetry and dramatic play, the students may learn about drugs and the consequences of taking them.

**Key words:** drug abuse prevention; prevention programme; interactive approach; puppet play

### 1. Introduction

The process of children's and adolescents' growth takes place in an exceptionally dynamic and complex civilizational and social context nowadays. The modern pace of life, changes in the dynamics and structure of the family, global informatization, the problems of transition in South-East European countries, the developed countries' economies under recession, the increasing hunger in the Third World countries, the declining birth-rate and demographical problems in many Western European countries, the ecological crisis and many other negative social issues have averted the much expected improved life quality and world peace. The relinquishment of the old and well-established traditional values and the available pluralism of value systems and life-styles seems to lead to the "deconstruction of the phase of youth" (Baacke, 1991, p. 41). These processes create a dynamic and complex social-cultural context in which the young grow up today.

The possibilities of functioning of the modern society have also been endangered by the increasing rates of drug addiction. Drug abuse and drug addiction are the primary social problem in many Western European

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countries. The drug addiction phenomenon is being analyzed through sociological, criminal, legal, medical, psychological and pedagogical aspects. The national strategies of many Western European countries point out that there is no simple solution of the drug addiction problem, and in the preventive activities, they stress the principle of the common, partner-like, integrated and integral approach to the prevention of drug addiction. This approach includes a systematic effort on the part of all the educational factors: the family, schools, the social community, public policies, religious institutions and the media.

In accordance with the above mentioned, it is important that the funding of the addiction prevention activities, damage control activities and drug supply reduction activities has been increased. Since addiction as a global phenomenon knows no national or geographic borders, the recent European addiction prevention strategies (EU Drugs Action Plan (2005-2008), 2005) stress the need for a coordinated international action, providing joint and organized support to addiction prevention programs and demand and supply reduction programs.

## **2. Drug addiction prevention**

The prevention of drug abuse and addiction is based on the principles that represent a common element of prevention programs, which are the result of long-term research in the field. Thus, a publication of the American National Institute on Drug Abuse (2003) lists 16 principles of addiction prevention that represent the guidelines in the analysis, planning, selection and application of the addiction prevention programs.

The literature discussing drug addiction prevention starts from the risk factors and the protection from addiction factors. It is by the concept of risk and protection factors that one aims to explain why a person becomes a drug addict, and another one is addiction-resistant. Several decades' research in the field of drug abuse etiology has revealed the complex interactive network of various individual, social and hereditary factors with varying intensity of influence during a person's development.

According to Ialongo, Poduska, Werthamer and Kellam (2001), early intervention programs intended to reduce the risk factors (e.g., aggressiveness and bad self-control) achieve better results than later interventions aimed to change a child's behavior toward the positive.

Investigating the risk and protective factors, Hawkins and collaborators (Hawkins, Catalano & Miller, 1992) considered that prevention programs achieve positive results by influencing the risk and protective factors accountable for drug abuse. Among the important risk factors that can be the targets of education, they lay special emphasis on the formation of the relevant normative beliefs and the development of adequate attitudes concerning drugs.

Hansen and McNeal's (1999) works represent a useful analysis of the drug education programs. These authors pointed out that the understanding of the normative practice in drug education is the key to improving the results of preventive interventions. Analyzing drug education over a long period in 146 high-school grades, the authors found out that almost half of the drug-related education focused on providing information on drugs and health-related consequences of drug abuse (actually 45.9% of total time).

Considering the rate of risk to become an addict, it is possible to speak of universal, selective and indicated prevention. These levels of prevention are also characterized by the temporal dimension, so the measures of primary prevention are taken before the occurrence of problems in the functioning of a person, the secondary prevention takes place after the occurrence of first symptoms and the tertiary prevention after the disorders are manifested. The universal programs for addiction prevention are intended for the general child and adolescent population, their parents, and also the social community factors. The aim of universal prevention is to prevent or

delay drug abuse, and it is based on various approach techniques. Universal prevention programs are implemented on large groups of population without prior determining of the rate of risk from possible drug abuse.

Concerning the application context, prevention programs can be carried out in various contexts—personal, peer, family, school contexts and the contexts of smaller or larger local communities.

The school context is the central application context of many addiction prevention programs (US Department of Education, 2001). Children spend a lot of time in the school environment, so school represents an adequate location for addiction prevention implementation.

Greenberg and collaborators (Greenberg, Weissberg, Utne O'Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik & Elias, 2003) expressed satisfaction with the evident progress and a firmer empirical instituting of school addiction prevention, a significant number of empirically tested prevention programs, with the abundant theoretical sources concerning the implementation of the authenticated models of prevention.

School prevention programs embrace a whole spectrum of preventive efforts, from formal educational programs to general preventive activities that are integrated into the everyday school life. Preventive activities at school make possible the acquisition of the necessary skills, attitudes and facts, and they are helpful in the process of making the decisions concerning personal health, safety and life philosophy. Efficient school prevention programs embrace personal skills training (decision-making, coping with stress, defining aims), education about drugs (facts about drugs and the consequences of taking drugs) and developing attitudes (especially correcting wrong concepts concerning drug use by peers). Drug education programs include various activities through which students acquire relevant information and analyze their views and their personal systems of values, as well as other persons' systems of values.

Among the school universal prevention systems, the effective ones are the interactive programs based on the model of social influences or life competences (Bühler & Kröger, 2006).

Since at the implementation of preventive activities one must make allowance for the principle of active knowledge and experienced acquisition of the practical use of skills, the authors have chosen playing with dolls as one of the possible interactive forms of work in addiction prevention in this paper. The children themselves construct their ideas, developing skills through interaction with puppets and other children.

### **3. Puppet play and learning**

Children easily confide their feelings and wishes to dolls. Beside that, a puppet makes better contact with children than a pedagogue or a parent could. A puppet's opinion will be accepted with more enthusiasm than a pedagogue's opinion without a doll, since doll represents authority. A puppet can therefore be used as a confidential mediator in the correlation between the children and their environment (Majaron, 2004, p. 7). It seems that stylization, which is the fundamental characteristic of the doll, helps children feel, accept and understand a symbolical situation. Through simplified situations, and by using objects as metaphors, it is possible to effectuate an abundance of allegorical games acceptable to children (Majaron, 2004, p. 7).

The learning process with the aid of a puppet is characterized by the esthetic double, which creates a split. In performing the action in a show or in a dramatic play, the split is between "being you" and "being a character". This split often causes "hyper-awareness". In the animated theater, the split is 3-fold, besides the role and one's own identity, there is also the animated figure that must exist within all of the 3 dimensions. This is a case of the "double mirror" or "meta-theater". Animated figures become symbols of persons (Hamre, 2004, p. 11). Playing

with the dolls, children have gained a theater which does not show a story; instead, a very loose plot is interrupted by commentaries—facts about harmfulness of smoking. Actually, this is a post-modern convention dominating theater today, and it is usually referred to as forum-theater and is very convenient as one of the forms of learning, which erases the difference between the performer and the audience, and deals with topical problems making real impact through theater.

Bastačić (1900, p. 15) claimed that conventional language in a puppet play acquires a different meaning. Play implies parallel existence of 2 realities. The player who creates the world of play and the world of rules enters that world by himself/herself. The world does not really change, but the fictitious world changes the player, the player does not remain confronted to the world, he/she becomes a part of it. Depending on the type of puppet, the play acts cathartically, and this is particularly true regarding puppets that are slipped on hands, the very kind that the authors have used.

In playing with puppets or while watching puppet plays, the transition from the fictitious to the real, and the other way, is exceptionally mild and easily made. The whole puppet theater, as well as children's play, is somehow based on this thin line between imagination and reality (Kovačić, 1969, p. 127).

A theater performance, regardless whether puppets or actors are used, or whether the children take part in it or watches it, makes it possible for the children to gradually distinguish the essential and the unessential, the necessary and the accidental, in the best way possible. Watching the performance, the children can also notice the relations between cause and effect (Misailović, 1991, p. 18). When children and grown-ups too, watch the puppets on stage, they become more and more alive as the longer they are being watched. After a while, the audiences forget that what is involved here is animated matter. Things slowly acquired life and became more real than the audiences. This moment precisely, when they start believing in the life of the not living, has magical elements. Everyone exists outside himself/herself, both the puppets and the children (Kovačić, 1969, p. 130). It is well known that, due to its capability of presenting the unreal, the puppet theater has unlimited possibilities, so the authors are used to the characters of dwarfs, princesses, monsters and fairies appearing on the puppet stage. Anyway, the puppet theater usually starts from where actors' theater ends. In the play, the authors saw, however, the heroes were neighborhood good guys and the theme was a topical one, the harmfulness of drugs. There was a reversal that, in order to present a very topical theme with very realistic characters, the authors used an expression already metaphorical on its own. A good choice of puppets and the mode of animation, and the usage of slang, though, made the performance vivid in a way acceptable to children. It is believed that puppet play is the most adequate means to present the theme discussing the harmfulness of smoking in a stylized and metaphorical manner.

#### **4. Puppet play in the function of addiction prevention**

In the research into the extent to which an educational theater performance can help prevention, the authors started by testing the knowledge on drugs in a 4th grade of a primary school. Next, the students saw the play, and after that, together with the teacher, the authors organized puppet-play workshops in which they used some of the elements from the play. The authors substituted mimic puppets, or in layman's terms "muppet dolls" from the play by simpler forms, so they used a puppet sock with no add-ons which they slipped on hands. Finally, the authors tested their knowledge on the harmfulness of drugs once again.

The play *Najveća su šteta droga i cigareta (Drugs and Cigarettes Do Most Harm)* performed by the puppet theater in Zadar was envisaged in accordance with an educational model, under the sponsorship of the Ministry of

Health and Social Welfare of the Republic of Croatia, and it was intended to explain all the bad consequences of the vice to young audiences. The author and director, Dražen Ferenčina, expressed the theme in the strongest manner by a line of one of the heroes, "If I give up smoking I'm sure I will never start doing drugs". Through a story of dropping the habit of smoking, the play warns against an ever more widespread disease of time, smoking and drug use. Each finding their own motives against the cigarette, the characters managed to resist the temptation and pointed at the harmfulness and the negative consequences of smoking in a funny way. The play also presents statistic data which are aimed to shock and frighten the young audience.

The author and director did not give nuance to the characters of the personage and used typical characters in typical situations, for 2 reasons: The first reason was to make it easy for the children to recognize themselves, because the aim was primarily an educative one; and the second one had to do with the particular qualities of puppet expression that uses symbols so that a single boy or girl has all their peers' traits. Because of that, the use of puppets in the presentation of such a theme is far more convincing than live actors would be.

The play *Drugs and Cigarettes Do Most Harm* uses mimic puppets, otherwise, best suited to puppet plays in which speech dominates over motion. Mimic puppets are of recent origin, and in the European puppetry tradition, they are usually created when the author wishes to depict man as a caricature. This is achieved by marked motions of the jaw, that is, by opening and closing of the mouth. Puppets of that sort were made popular by the *Muppet Show* series which gave them their name.

After the play, there was a different kind of work in dramatic workshops, so that the form of presentation by puppets changes the animator and the borderline between the audience and the performers disappears. That is, people came closer to the modern drama education which rejects the conventional ways of theater works at school. Staging the play is less important, and the primary interest is focused on the dramatic form, which is not theatrical only because the possibility of participation of anyone outside the group is either eliminated or negligible. The work is directed to the group and it only serves to teach the facts on the harmfulness of drugs. The difference between a child's participation in a theatre performance and in the workshops is that, in the first case, the child goes through experiences presented in a parallel world; and in the second, it creates these experiences as a contestant in the play (Jurkowski, 2007, p. 341). Learning aided by dolls is beneficial, because puppetry integrates almost all the disciplines important for a child's development: perception, coordination and interaction with the environment, speech and story.

The authors started with puppet improvisations aware of the fact that children should measure up to the requirements concerning originality and detach themselves from the puppet play stereotypes by the very choice of the puppet. It all had to be captivating and reminiscent of children's play<sup>1</sup>. Everyone participates in the play in an equal manner. Nobody should be left aside as an observer.

They first came to understand that any object can be a puppet. It was important to people that they "make" a doll themselves, for making one's own dolls enables the students to begin expressing themselves from the very start, from the moment they choose a character. That is, they had brought, chosen and slipped on their hands the sock-doll themselves, so they did not spend much time making dolls. The first stage of the work, which teachers

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<sup>1</sup> The 4 essential characteristics of playing with puppets are: (1) Comicality of the puppet; (2) The puppet is always put in the role of a typical representative who must clearly express uncompromising views and support them; (3) The pace of a puppet play is slow because the idea is repeatedly expounded so that it may be understood and accepted. On the other hand, it suits the child's wish for repetition. Always the same story, song or game make children happy; and (4) Striking examples on the puppet stage have marked consequences in everyday life (Kovačić, 1969, p. 134).

and educators are quite fond of, was simply skipped so they could concentrate on the more important issues<sup>2</sup>.

The authors tried to make a moment of animation, so that puppet might acquire a magic form in which inanimate matter comes to life. The characters needed no special elaboration since they were simply boys or girls. A characteristic of the puppet theatre is that dolls are types so character peculiarities are lost, and dolls become signs.

After that, the authors defined the content of the story, starting from the introduction. The authors met the characters and the place of the puppet play. The plot would be the dialogs among children about the harmfulness of drugs. The peak of the action would be when each child tells other children what he/she had learned about the drug harmfulness issue.

The authors wanted to develop 3 ways of communication with dolls: First, the doll talks to the audience instead of the children when the characters/dolls introduce themselves and when the audiences learn about the spot in which the plot takes place. Then, the children talk to the dolls as a partner when the harmfulness of drugs is discussed, and finally, 2 dolls talk to each other as 2 partners and tell each other what they have learned about the harmfulness of drugs.

## 5. Instead of a conclusion

The children, as a constructive creator of its own education and development, is in constant interaction with its social and physical environment. Growing up in a specific social-cultural context, children construct and co-construct knowledge in an intensive interaction with the environment. Individual development is a result of social interaction within which the group members share and internalize common cultural denotations. The children do not acquire their experiences in a passive manner, they interpret and construe them actively. Reflecting upon a possible interactive approach to the construction of school-children's knowledge about drugs, the authors therefore chose a puppet play and a drama workshop. Children, among other things, are motivated to express and compare diverse opinions, to negotiate, to hear other people's statements and to reformulate initial assumptions. The authors achieved a very dynamic atmosphere that contributed to a vivid and interesting communication.

Comparing the results of the initial and the final tests of the students' knowledge concerning drugs, it is noticeable that there were far more correct answers in the final test, administered after the drama workshop. As an illustration, 50% of the children stated that tobacco is not a drug in the first test, and only 15% gave the same answer in the final one.

Using puppet plays as an interactive way of acquisition of knowledge on drugs and the consequences of drug abuse is proved to be an attractive and entertaining form of learning. Such an approach to learning is completely different from the traditional approaches and didactic teaching by grown-ups. The emphasis is on free and active participation in common activities, active listening, shared deliberation and mutual understanding.

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<sup>2</sup> Kovačić's model of child work with puppets (1969, p. 137): The child speaks on his/her own first, then takes a puppet that speaks while the child is hidden, after that the puppet speaks and the child is visible. With this method, both the child and the doll speak to the audience. In the second phase, the child talks to the doll, then two children talk to the doll, then dolls talk to each other and the children are hidden, then the two dolls talk to each other and the children are visible, and finally, the children talk to their doll-partners.

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