

“They know more about drugs than I do ...”

by Paul Dillon



One of the most common fears for anyone who works with young people is they believe the adolescents they have contact with know more about illicit drugs than they do. The catch-cry is usually something like “How can I talk to them about this topic, they know far more about drugs than me!” and can result in opportunities for valuable conversations being missed.

A few years ago I was developing a resource on ecstasy and related drugs (ERDs) and had to interview teachers on the topic. When asked about talking to students about the topic almost everybody I spoke to felt the same way – they believed that the young people would know far more than they did and, as a result, they wouldn't feel comfortable providing information about that particular range of drugs in a classroom setting, or even responding to a student's question on the subject should one ever arise.

Here is an example of one of the responses:

I feel pretty intimidated when the subject of ecstasy and other drugs comes up. I'm an English teacher but take a pastoral care group each week and sometimes the subject of drugs comes up. I don't have too much trouble dealing with alcohol or a drug like cannabis. I haven't a clue about ecstasy though.

Some students also like throwing words around that I obviously don't understand and that makes me feel terribly uncomfortable. I know nothing about ecstasy and dance culture. Raves weren't around when I was a teenager and my usual response is to try and change the subject as quickly as possible. I've heard that we should use discussions like these, but for me, there's nothing positive about the experience and I'm sure the students get nothing from these discussions apart from enjoying my obvious discomfort.

I'd like to think that this response is just limited to classroom teachers but I also hear similar comments from a range of health professionals who work with adolescents, and even youth workers. Admittedly it often depends on the illicit drug being dealt with (i.e., feeling comfortable talking about cannabis due to personal experience but much more concerned about drugs like ecstasy), but as newer drugs continue to become available it is imperative that those working with young people do not fall into the trap of avoiding valuable discussions because they don't know everything there is to know about drugs!

Firstly, do young people know more about drugs than you do? Although they may think they know more about certain drugs than the adults around them, this is highly

unlikely. They certainly think they know more but even teens who are involved in dance culture and have come in contact with drugs like ecstasy rarely have an up-to-date and balanced understanding of the substances they may be using. Often they have been provided information by their peers, which can be extremely biased and is often completely incorrect. That said, some certainly know a phenomenal amount about their drug of choice but does that mean you can't talk to them about what they know?

Although it is important to acknowledge the information that they believe to be true, it is also vital that this be scrutinised and checked for accuracy. Dismissing teens' beliefs around their drug of choice is dangerous but challenging their views and directing them to find out more from a range of sources is important and can strengthen your relationship with the young person if done correctly.

Most importantly, however, do you need to know 'everything' about drugs to talk about them effectively with young people? Of course not! If you want to look at it from a teacher perspective, if you were an English Literature teacher – do you know every book that has ever been written? Of course you don't, and you certainly don't need to know everything about drugs to contribute to a discussion about the subject. Always remember to never pretend that you know more than you really do – they'll see right through that very quickly! If you don't know the answer, tell them you don't know and then suggest that you try to find out the answer together.

When I interviewed teachers their greatest concern was that they would be made to look foolish by students who used 'street slang' to describe particular drugs to try to catch them out. Of course, there are always going to be teens who are going to use terminology that you may not necessarily understand – it happens to me almost every day! Drug culture changes all the time – so you would have to be fairly 'with it' to keep up-to-date in that area. When terms are used that you don't understand be honest and admit that you don't know what they are talking about. This sort of experience should be seen as a valuable opportunity to learn more about the subject with the young people.

It is also imperative that anyone working with young people be conscious of 'duty of care' in this area. Having conversations with young people about illegal drugs can be problematic if not handled correctly, with a discussion in the classroom between a teacher and students needing very different rules and boundaries compared to a one-on-one meeting involving a young person and a youth worker. Always ensuring that everyone speaks in the 'third person' is a great way of protecting all involved, no matter what context.

There is no doubt that some students may know more about illicit drugs, particularly current drug culture, than you do but that does not mean that they know everything. Use every opportunity you can to debunk myths and increase their (and your) knowledge on this controversial subject.

Source; <http://www.generationnext.com.au/2014/06/know/>