

# PARENTLINE PLUS RESPONSE TO DRUGS: YOUR COMMUNITY, YOUR SAY

## Overview

Parentline Plus welcomes the opportunity to comment on the government's plans which will shape a new drugs strategy. This response is submitted in our role as the voice for parents and reflects the views and concerns of parents who use our services around their children's drug use. Parentline, our free confidential 24 hour line for parents, offers help and support to thousands of parents every year – with worries about drug taking and teenagers being one of the key issues. We feel that more has to be done to support parents and through them, their children, that is based on an understanding of the pressures on family life in this context.

Parents and other close members of the family are usually the first to spot something is wrong but often do not have the confidence and knowledge to intervene effectively or to point the young person to further help and information. When looking at issues raised by parents we see a picture of parents feeling out of control, with little understanding of what to say to their children about drugs and where to turn to for more information or advice, particularly if their children are teenagers and already breaking away from the family unit.

It also indicates that parents are deeply anxious, stressed and isolated as they try to tackle their family problems. Parents are not just telling us about their children's drug use – they want to talk about worrying levels of anger and conflict, crime, lying, running away and mixing with a bad crowd – behaviours they link with drug abuse. The evidence reinforces other call data studies we have undertaken, which show that many families speak of their children demonstrating a range of serious problems and challenging behaviours. As one parent told us:

***“My son is 'totally out of hand'. He is abusive, violent and smashed up the house. He 'had me round the throat' and yesterday threw our puppy across the room, damaging its leg. He was excluded from school last year for striking a teacher. We have been to the doctor and he recommends counselling but there is a waiting list.”***

Early preventive work with parents must be implemented to ensure that parental attitudes, understanding and communication skills act as protective factors against possible future drug use. Research with families where there is drug and alcohol abuse, shows that more information at an earlier stage would have helped them prevent abuse or enabled parents to recognise early problems.<sup>1</sup> If parents are enabled to give advice on drug use and have a realistic understanding about drugs and their use or misuse before their child comes into

contact with drugs, such as when they enter secondary school, they will be delivering a vital preventive service.

It is imperative that parents are offered family support early on which will allow them to build on their own parenting style and skills. The support must then be sustained by flexible services delivered at key transition points in their child's life – from the early years to when a teenager leaves home. Such sustained support will deliver a stronger family unit, reducing the conflicts and challenges that may result in drug taking and other risk taking behaviours.

However, parents and carers must be able to assume that they are *entitled* to information and support if they need it or want it about any issue or problem they, or their children, are experiencing. If support is presented as an entitlement, the stigma attached to seeking help is removed. It is then easier to target help at those who find it hard to access. Only within a culture of entitlement, will services be seen as enhancing parents' role when things are going well and helping when they are not so good.

### **The role of universal services**

We welcome the report's focus on better education and interventions for young people and families but urge that this is not only delivered by specialist agencies but is also available via universal family support services. In the case of parent, child and family support, excellent and appropriate signposting would then be ensured. Such training for drugs practitioners in working with parents and signposting would enable more awareness about other problems around family issues, as would training for those delivering universal services for parents.

In the context of the whole family approach, we also urge that government is seen to work across departments and agencies and that this approach be promoted via recommendations to local government and local authorities. Such inter government partnerships would do much to develop and promote a synergy between universal and local services and so meet the needs of parents and their children across a broad service platform.

### **Raising awareness**

The consultation asks for input around who is being missed out in information campaigns and requests ideas on what could be measured etc. We say that it is parents and carers that are missing. Parentline Plus has for many years run issue based awareness raising campaigns – particularly around bullying and encouraging parents to talk to their children about sex and relationships. This expertise has enabled us to shape a model for such an awareness raising campaign which has users at its core and ensures an independent and non judgemental approach is adopted. Lessons learnt from this work would be valuable in developing the public information elements of the strategy.

We welcome the emphasis on public information and the need to for an increased knowledge base about drugs among parents. However we feel this should deliver information, **plus** advice and support. Parents often say to us that they do not know enough about drugs to give the preventive messages to their children. By developing a parent targeted campaign which not only delivers tips and strategies that parents can understand and act upon, but helps them find more support, is vital. And that can only work if parents are involved right from the outset in planning, informing and reviewing the campaign. Parents use the parent element of FRANK but often they ring Parentline because they need more than just information.

We suggest that an awareness raising campaign focuses on getting the preventive messages across to parents of children aged 9-12. Parents come to us and talk of how 'teenage behaviour' is apparent in younger children, and that there is little information on how to give the preventive messages which are targeted at parents of teenagers. Our work with parents worried about bullying whose children are at a time of transition to secondary school demonstrates that this is a key time to embed these messages and adapt them to be relevant to a younger age group.

### **Treatment initiatives**

We welcome the section on Users and Carers. We hope that there will be more funding for whole family therapeutic and prevention services which are planned with parents and users. Where these are available, parents and their drug using children can work together to build up trust and commitment to change bolstered by the counsellor or therapist and the drawing up of a change and treatment plan.

Signed By: Jan Fry  
Date: 10<sup>th</sup> October 2007

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<sup>i</sup> **Families in Focus, a report on families in England affected by problems with drugs and alcohol, Adfam, November 2002.**