

CORK SOCIAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION PROJECT

**STRENGTHENING FAMILY COMMUNICATION TO
PREVENT MISUSE OF ALCOHOL AND DRUGS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF EVALUATION STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

This Executive Summary is based on the Report of an Evaluation Study carried out on the pilot programme **Strengthening Family Communication in Order to Prevent Misuse of Alcohol and Drugs** run by the Cork Social and Health Education Project (CSHEP). The main Report comprises three sections. The first section outlines the background from which the pilot programme developed, and the perception of need which led to its initiation. This section also describes the programme aims and objectives and its structure and major themes. The second section of the main Report describes the evaluation procedures used and the findings obtained. Findings are presented with regard to: the process of establishing the parent groups; parents' goals and expectations on entering the programme; parents' perceptions of key learning outcomes; perceptions of parents and tutors on programme strengths, drawbacks and changes needed and perceptions of tutors of their own training course. The third section of the main Report presents conclusions from the findings and raises some key issues for the future consolidation and development of the programme.

Since the programme under study is at the formative stage of development, the evaluation procedures used were mainly qualitative rather than quantitative in nature. The evaluation was designed primarily to ensure that the programme, as it develops, meets the needs of parents and to provide the designers of the programme with the feedback needed to ensure its future effectiveness and development

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES ARISING

Overall Positive Response

The findings from the different feedback procedures used give strong support to the programme as it was run in its pilot phase. Both the written accounts and the personal interviews with the parents reveal overall a very positive response to the programme. Parents highlight many learning outcomes and provide concrete examples of how they have been putting into practice the learning achieved. The parents value the opportunity of meeting and sharing with other parents and of discovering shared problems and experiences and see this as a main strength of the programme. The parents are clearly enthusiastic in their recommendation of the programme to other parents in the community.

From another perspective, the feedback from the tutors also reveals a very positive response to the programme. They perceive that by the end of the 10 weeks, the significance of the link between family communication and drug-abuse prevention is understood and accepted by the participants. They believe that the approach employed is a valuable way of working with parents and perceive that many positive outcomes - particularly in relation to listening, communication, assertiveness and self-esteem - were achieved. The tutors are satisfied with the training received and all would be happy to run a similar programme again - if time commitments allowed.

Issues to be Addressed

Within this context of an overall positive response, a number of issues have been raised by participants and by tutors which have significance for the future consolidation and development of the programme. These issues are summarised below:

Initial Expectations of Participants

- In many cases, initial expectations of participants are heavily focused on drug education. Information on the programme needs to make clearer what the programme is about and needs to emphasise the fact that it has two major aspects. It appears that written information on its own is not sufficient and at least needs to be supplemented by verbal information. An initial information session could play a valuable role in shaping appropriate expectations.
- Apart from expectations about the content of the programme, participants also often have inaccurate expectations about how the programme will be run with many expecting a lecture format. The initial dismay and discomfort experienced by some participants on discovering the participative nature of the programme could again be eased by making clearer in the initial information given how the programme operates.

Targeting of Participants

- Compared to mothers there is a relatively low level of fathers participating in the programme. Further research needs to be carried out to explore why spouses/partners of the present participants did not attend and to discover what factors would attract men into the programme and what factors inhibit their participation.
- Further attention also needs to be given to the best means of drawing more 'at risk' groups into the programme.
- Written invitations to participate, on their own, appear to attract a low take-up rate.

Objectives Set for the Programme

- Tutors suggest that the objectives set are, perhaps, too ambitious in terms of what can be achieved in a 10 week programme. Programme objectives could be scaled down to some extent or, alternatively, programme duration could be extended.

Session Structure

- The session structure incorporating the three elements of information, communication and skill learning is useful but challenging and difficult to handle. Flexibility in carrying out the sessions to meet the needs of a particular group is of central importance.
- Further attention needs to be given to simplifying sessions so that participants and tutors are not overburdened.

Session Procedure

- Role-plays and sharing of personal attitudes and experiences emerge as difficult for many participants at the beginning of the programme. The participants' previous experience of group-work is an important influence on how they react to such procedures. These are issues which will need to be taken into account in the training of new groups of tutors.
- Certain sessions are capable of having a powerful impact on participants. Consideration needs to be given to the possibility of back-up support should it be needed.
- The groups vary greatly in the extent to which they are at ease with sharing and self-disclosure and the level to which they respond to the programme materials presented.

Tutor Training

- The support and personal development needs of the tutors are currently very well met. The balance of the training needs adjustment so that the need of tutors for practical experience of the session materials is equally well addressed. This issue is likely to assume greater significance where tutors with less group-work experience than those currently involved are being trained.
- The interlinking of time-schedules for the training sessions and the programme sessions needs to be carefully planned to ensure that tutors have the materials needed sufficiently well in advance of running the sessions. This again is an issue likely to be of more significance for tutors with less experience than those currently involved in the programme.