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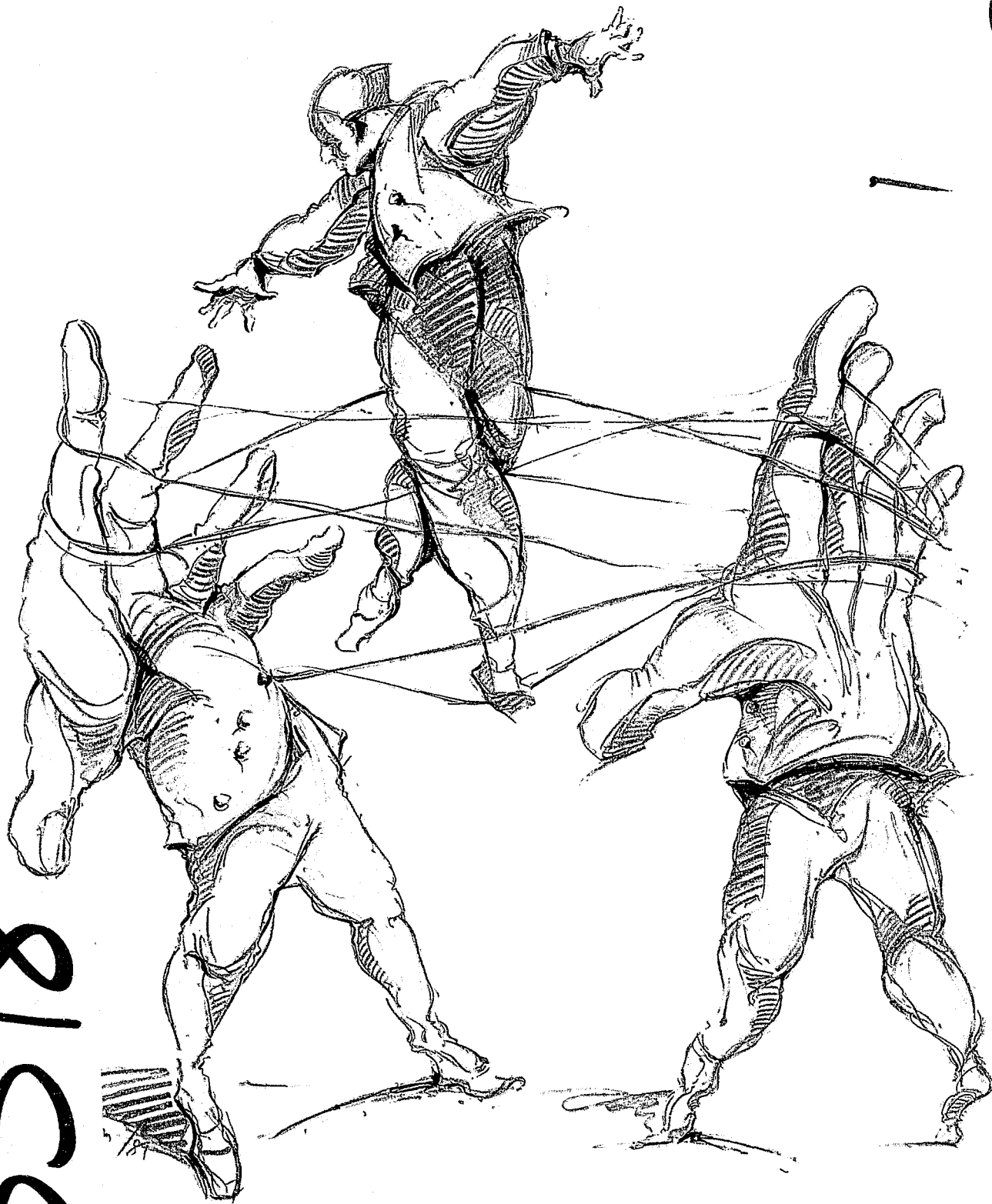
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# High-Risk Youth

HIGH-RISK YOUTH NATIONAL PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

SPONSORED BY THE NATIONAL SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER

**L**ong-term drug abuse prevention programs must answer the question: Why do some young people turn to illegal drugs — and others don't? That's the aim of a new risk-focused approach that targets specific social, economic, family and individual behavioral factors that contribute to drug abuse.

Children who possess a number of these negative factors are known as "high-risk youth." According to new research, they are more likely to develop a drug abuse problem, much as a person who has a high cholesterol diet, doesn't exercise and smokes cigarettes has a higher risk of developing heart disease.

\* \* \*

The risk factors for drug abuse among youth include these traits:

*Individual* — anti-social/delinquent behavior; deferential attitudes about drugs; early experimentation with drugs; learning disabilities; suicide attempts; being a runaway; mental health problems.

*Family* — parent drug/alcohol abuse; poor family management; low bonding; child abuse/neglect; social/economic deprivation.

*Peer* — association with peers who

are drug abusers, anti-social or delinquent.

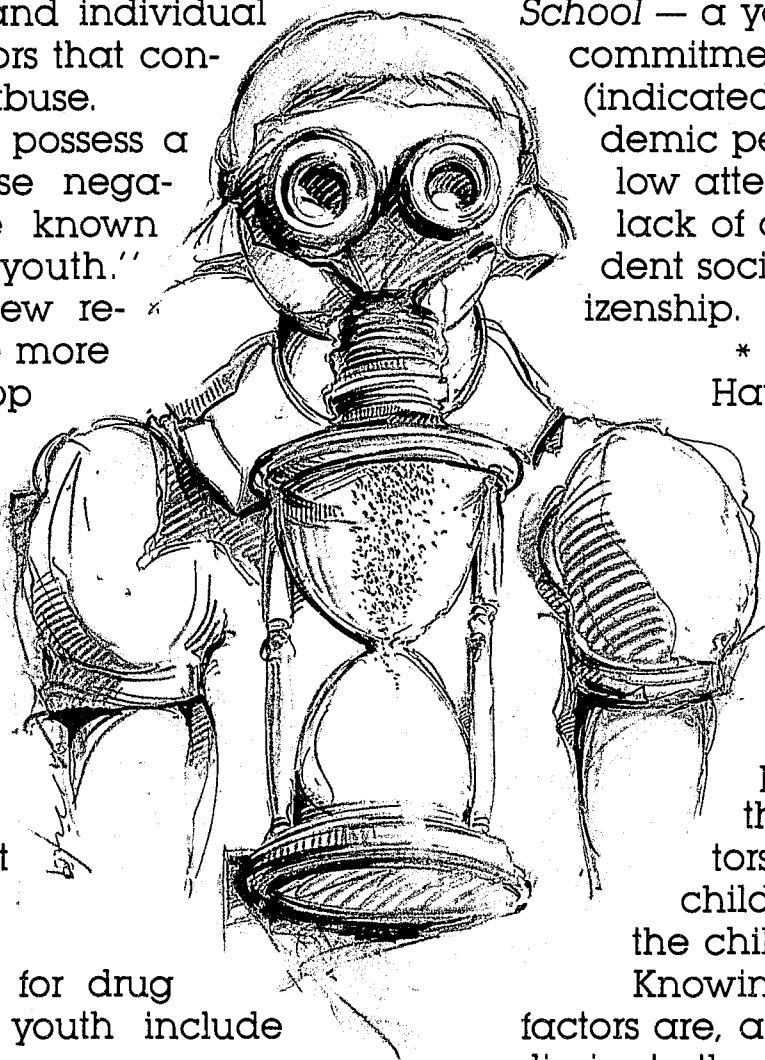
*Community* — a high crime rate and a high level of drug abuse and gang activity; poor public/social services; impoverished environment.

*School* — a youth's lack of commitment to education (indicated by poor academic performance and low attendance); schools' lack of attention to student socialization and citizenship.

\* \* \*

Having one or more risk factors does not mean a child will use illegal drugs. But it does make the child more vulnerable to drug abuse problems. And the more risk factors present in a child's life, the greater the child's vulnerability.

Knowing what these factors are, and how to reduce or eliminate them, will help parents, educators, social workers, law enforcers and members of the juvenile justice system care for troubled youths. That is the goal of the High-Risk Youth National Public Awareness Campaign, sponsored by the National School Safety Center and funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.



**P**romising approaches to drug abuse prevention programs based on "risk factors" — each with a slightly different focus — have already been developed. The common thread throughout is providing high-risk youth with positive opportunities, relevant skills and appropriate rewards for accomplishments and responsible behavior.

#### Focus on parenting education

Parents can help their children stay off drugs by providing a supportive and secure atmosphere at home. Some prevention programs teach parents how to monitor their children's behavior and how to use appropriate and consistent discipline. Research indicates that this common-sense approach works. Children exhibit less problem behavior at school and at home, and they become more attached to their parents.

George J. McKenna, superintendent of the Inglewood Unified School District in Inglewood, California, actively encourages parental involvement in schools. That is why he hired parents to call other parents and ask them to volunteer their time to visit classrooms, monitor restrooms and schoolyards, and generally take part in the life of their child's school.

#### Focus on involving concerned adults

Not every kid has parents who care. Some have parents who are absent, abusive, alcoholic or mentally ill. In those cases, other concerned adults or "surrogate" parents — relatives, neighbors or teachers — can make an enormous difference.

That was the conclusion of a 35-year study by Emmy E. Werner, professor of human development and research child psychologist at the University of California, Davis. She found that, while some children are constitutionally more resistant to risk factors, all children can be helped to avoid drugs if a caring adult encourages their individual accountability and independence, teaches them problem-solving and communication skills, boosts their self-confidence, and models as well as rewards acts of helpfulness and cooperation.

Werner's findings underscore the important role that every member of the community can play in determining the future of our youth.

#### Focus on early childhood education

The lessons we learn as children often stay with us all our lives. Authorities suggest that young children be taught interpersonal skills — such as how to play with other children, be assertive without being aggressive, communicate clearly, make responsible decisions, cope with anxiety, and recognize the relationship between cause and effect — that will give them the strength and self-confidence to reject drugs.

#### Focus on peer support and counseling

Kids often turn to other kids when they have problems, so

training students to act as peer counselors for their classmates can be very helpful, according to Loretta Middleton, director of the Substance Abuse/Student Well-Being Team with the San Diego County Office of Education. She has learned that children need to talk about their feelings, whether to a peer counselor, teacher or school psychologist. By talking out their problems, students can learn healthy ways to cope with their negative feelings instead of using illegal drugs to cover up their emotions.

#### Focus on social influences

Some kids use illegal drugs because their friends do. Others absorb messages from society which say that using drugs — whether cigarettes, alcohol or illegal substances — is cool. To combat these social influences, school and parent partnership programs teach students:

- to correctly estimate how many of their classmates take drugs (most students come up with an unrealistically high figure);
- to recognize the health and social risks of illegal drug use;
- to resist the pressure to use illegal drugs;
- and, most importantly, to make a specific commitment to lead drug-free lives.

#### Focus on the environment

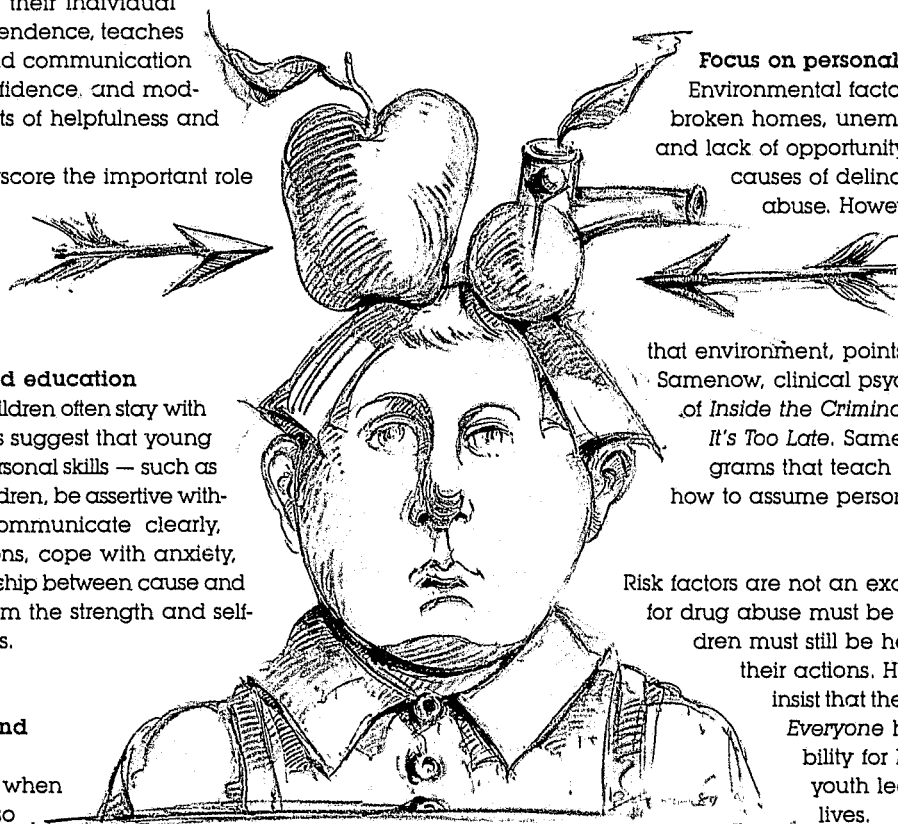
Because it is often difficult to identify individual drug abusers, focusing on the environment can address factors that affect all youths, from those who experiment with drugs to those who become chronic abusers. University of Washington professor David Hawkins suggests targeting high-risk neighborhoods, schools or communities, rather than individuals, for drug abuse prevention programs.

#### Focus on personal choice

Environmental factors, such as poverty, broken homes, unemployment, racism and lack of opportunity, often are cited as causes of delinquency and drug abuse. However, it is not the environment that is critical, but how people choose to respond to

that environment, points out Stanton E. Samenow, clinical psychologist and author of *Inside the Criminal Mind* and *Before It's Too Late*. Samenow suggests programs that teach anti-social youth how to assume personal responsibility.

Risk factors are not an excuse. Zero-tolerance for drug abuse must be the norm. And children must still be held accountable for their actions. However, we must not insist that they do so in a vacuum. Everyone has to take responsibility for helping high-risk youth lead positive, fulfilling lives.



**G**et involved.... Drug abuse prevention is everyone's business. High-risk youth can be directed toward positive lives with the help of parents, neighbors, teachers, friends, and community service and law enforcement agencies.

How? Everyone must make a commitment to support schools, communities and families in their efforts to reach high-risk youth.

Schools must teach students more than the three Rs. They must teach character development as well as decision-making, problem-solving and social skills so that youth develop positive standards of behavior. Law-related education also should be part of every school's curriculum, teaching students to respect and value our nation's legal system.

Peer support programs can provide a way for responsible students to show concern and support for their more troubled classmates. And alternative schools should be available for youth who have serious learning or behavioral problems, where they can get the attention they deserve.

Community service agencies must expand their youth counseling centers and other child protection services. They must also take charge of enhancing public safety, improving park services and recreational opportunities, and providing additional job training programs and health clinics.

Parents must encourage their children to associate with responsible peers, participate in and support their children's school activities, and provide a supportive and secure home, which includes practicing firm and consistent discipline.

For those parents who need help in raising their families and are struggling with the effects of joblessness and poverty, a number of organizations — including schools, religious institutions and community service agencies — must offer programs that teach parenting skills, family management and job-skills training.

All of these measures should be supported by the community. Members of the public can help by participating in neighborhood watch programs, actively supporting local school programs, or, on an individual basis, acting as role models — even "surrogate parents" — for troubled youth in their communities.

Only by a concerted effort on everyone's part can we help high-risk youth and ensure a drug-free future for America.

*America's drug abuse must stop. Our best hope for a long-term solution is through our youth. We have identified some serious factors linking youths to drug abuse problems. Now what? In a word, we have to care — about ourselves, about high-risk youth, about our families, about our schools, about our neighborhoods, and literally about our country's future. Make a commitment to be drug-free. Make a commitment to help others to be drug-free. It is contagious.*

Order "High-Risk Youth/At the Crossroads" today. To receive your videotape and information about other NSSC High-Risk Youth Campaign and school safety activities, complete the order form below.

**"HIGH-RISK YOUTH/AT THE CROSSROADS"**

Please send me \_\_\_\_\_ copy(ies) of "High-Risk Youth/At the Crossroads." I understand the cost per copy is \$50 for VHS or Beta videocassette. I am enclosing a check payable to the National School Safety Center for \$\_\_\_\_\_.

Indicate quantities and format: \_\_\_\_\_ VHS \_\_\_\_\_ Beta

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Mail order form and check to the National School Safety Center, 16830 Ventura Blvd., Suite 200, Encino, CA 91436.

## High-Risk Youth/At the Crossroads

"Feeling good about yourself can't be bought on a street corner. It must be built from within. But there are dangers you should know about. Those pressures we call 'risk factors....'"

This powerful message to America's troubled children is presented in "High-Risk Youth/At the Crossroads," a 22-minute documentary on youth drug abuse prevention hosted by actor LeVar Burton. (Burton is currently a co-star in "Star Trek" and host of "Reading Rainbow." He also starred in the highly acclaimed "Roots" television miniseries.)



**LeVar Burton**  
Host/Actor

This informative videotape speaks not only to children, but also to educators, law enforcers, social workers and, in fact, to all concerned citizens. Such a communitywide effort to prevent drug abuse is mandatory, according to the National School Safety Center. NSSC sponsored the documentary, which was produced by Medina Productions, Inc. Both NSSC and Medina have received Emmys and numerous other national awards for previous documentaries.

By combining real-life profiles and commentary from nationally renowned authorities, the documentary provides a compelling case to look beyond current drug abuse intervention strategies exemplified by the "Just Say No" campaign. Researchers have identified individual, family, peer, community and school-related problems that make kids more prone to use illegal drugs. The focus on positive responses — improving family and peer relations, encouraging and



**George McKenna**  
School Superintendent



rewarding responsible behavior, ensuring that school plays a positive role in children's lives, expanding public and social

services, as well as recreational opportunities for youths — suggests that the most promising approach to "high-risk youth" and drug abuse is one of *prevention*, not simply *intervention*. This important theme is reinforced throughout the fast-paced program.

The videotape points out, "No one has to face the problem of drugs alone. Talk to your parents or go out and find someone to talk to. There are plenty of community programs and religious groups or just plain friends who want to help, who must help. They can connect with you. Staying drug-free is your only option, a real chance to escape."

"High-Risk Youth/At the Crossroads" is available from NSSC on VHS or Beta videotapes for \$50.