

*Through all Life Education programmes there runs the theme that "You are special and unique".*

Fiona Johnson

# Life Education: a positive impact

**A**re you worried about the misuse of drugs by young people? What is the answer? Money is invested in rehabilitation, but surely it is better to prevent the situation arising in the first place. This is the aim of a national charity called Life Education Centres, the inspiration for which goes back to when the first Centre was established, in 1979.

The charity is based within the community involving schools, youth groups and parents. At present there are 19 Life Education Centres in the UK — I work in the West Dorset region, where I visit 52 schools on an annual basis. We follow these children through each year, offering them a positive and innovative drugs-prevention programme as an integral part of their school curriculum.

Currently, 250,000 children in the UK and about two million in the world are involved in Life Education. We aim to inspire within children a respect and wonder for their bodies and a realisation of their incredible potential, while building on their understanding of how various substances will affect them. In addition we develop within each child the knowledge, skills, and most importantly the motivation to make informed choices.

## Emphasising the body

We capture their imagination by transporting them into a whole new environment within the Life Education high-tech caravan. Under a starlit ceiling they encounter a talking brain, body models, puppets, and a video screen. We use these novel surroundings to discuss in class groups how our bodies work and what affects them, leading to why people take drugs and relevant decision-making skills.

You will notice that much of our work concentrates on how wonderful and complex the human body is. When the Life Education programmes were first developed, research showed that people with drug problems had little appreciation or understanding of their bodies. By teaching children how amazing they are, we give them real reasons why they should look after their bodies and engender in them a positive sense of self.

## A spiral programme

Life Education is a spiral programme revisiting children in every school year from ages 4–13. It is no good leaving an important message about drug misuse until a child is 13, as a



child's attitudes start developing from Day 1. For this reason, our sessions start with children aged 4 years old. We do not necessarily mention drugs with the younger ones, but instead focus on attitudes towards food and the importance of a balanced diet.

In Year 4 (8-9 years old) we start to discuss what they know about cigarettes and alcohol. We also focus on the choices we make in everyday life. With the older age groups we examine how drugs affect the body and what influences our decisions.

We encourage discussion about friendships using role play and the media influences with the use of a video screen. This allows us to debate as a group what issues concern us with regard to drug misuse. We also look at what we as individuals can do.

### Great excitement

As a trained teacher now working with Life Education, it is very rewarding to hear the children and young people leaving the session saying "That was brilliant. When are we coming back?" They never used to say that when they left my maths lessons! Since the Life Education schedule enables me to see the same children every

year from when they are 4 up to 13 years, it is with great excitement that the young people welcome me and the Life Education Centre caravan back to their school.

For the younger children we have a mascot called Harold, who is a giraffe. The children adore Harold and often write letters to him saying what they are going to do to keep themselves healthy. Through songs, stories, and activities featuring Harold the children are able to discover how to keep healthy and how to make informed choices, often in the face of seemingly irresistible pressures. Harold has his own fanclub and also appears throughout the range of Life Education Centre follow-up materials, including the popular 'Harold's Greatest Hits' song cassette and accompanying song book. He is a central character in the programme, and appears on the outside of the mobiles as a colourful reminder to the children of the programme and its message.

### Working with the schools

Through all Life Education programmes there runs the theme that "You are special and unique". We aim to raise self-esteem in young people. This is done in the content of the ses-

sions (for example, discussions about our personal likes and what makes us special), and also in our interaction with the children. Every comment is responded to in a positive manner. Obviously it is impossible to raise self-esteem in one session each year, so we therefore work closely with schools, doing pre-visits and staff sessions so that programmes are followed up and the messages are reinforced.

Often, conversations over lunch are about how the children responded. I also take in a box of resources and follow-up ideas for teachers to use. I have developed an open and friendly relationship with the schools I visit, and I always look forward to going back each year and seeing familiar faces.

It is also very encouraging, going back to schools for perhaps the fourth year running, to see how much the children remember. They often recount events that happened in the first year's programme as if it was yesterday, when in fact it could have been three years ago.

### What is inside the caravan?

The resources within the mobile workshop include the following:

#### *Body modules*

These vivid displays show children how the different parts of the body combine to form systems such as the digestive, circulatory, nervous and immune systems. By finding out how each of these systems works normally, our educators can then start to challenge the children about how these systems may be affected by the use of drugs.

#### *Audio-visuals*

Each age-graded (4-13 years) Life Education programme has audio-visual 'triggers' to initiate discussion on a range of issues from eating a balanced diet to resisting peer pressure, exploring our unique personalities, and more.

#### *Karpet Kid*

A practical, hands-on activity for the younger children, 'Karpet Kid' is used to help reinforce the children's growing knowledge and interest in the human body. One child acts as 'the Kid', lying on the specially-designed carpet outline, while each classmate chooses one of the latex body parts and tries to place it where they think it should go while discussing the function of that particular body part.

#### *Talking Brain*

A personable character who appears in our younger-aged programmes to help children learn more about the incredible potential of their brains, as well as finding out about each of their personalities and about feelings. This is a fun way to introduce concepts, which will be built on later, particularly when we examine the effects that various substances have on the brain.

#### *Star ceiling*

A special feature of our mobiles is the twinkling star ceiling used in some of the programmes to help set a mood or scene, for example blasting off to the Planet Conformation. The star ceiling and dimming light system help our educators to create an atmosphere which is both stimulating and exciting. The star ceiling allows for focus on the external and internal environment.

#### *TAM (Transparent Anatomical Mannikin)*

Our educators use TAM to help the children discover the magic and wonder of their bodies. Each organ can illuminate, so that children can easily see its location and size.

#### *Children*

Child motifs are often featured on the outside of our mobiles in honour of our main target audience.

### The 'three attitudes' to drugs

Within any group of Year 6 children there will be a range of attitudes and experiences with respect to drugs and their use. For example, some will never misuse any drug, while others may do depending on the situation and influences upon them. For the rest, nothing appears to be able to change their attitudes: they may already have started smoking, drinking alcohol, or taking something else.

For the first group the aim is to empower them to influence others in a positive way so that they will encourage others not to misuse drugs. [See David Emmett on empowering the anti-drug majority in *Education and Health* Vol 12 No 5 — Ed.] For the middle group it is to help them examine the situations they may find themselves in. We discuss why they would or would not take a drug from friends, the consequences of their actions, and their views on their friendships. By looking at the situation before it

may arise, they are empowered to make the decision they want to make and not just what their friends suggest.

For the last group, it is important to help them examine what has influenced their decisions so far. Are they happy with their decisions? How do they view the drug situation in our society? Is it what they want to be a part of, and can they do anything to change the situation?

Each mobile classroom can see up to 13,000 children each year, as well as parents, teachers, and community members. No other drug education programme directly works with children and young people using the type of specialised, stimulating, and logically-progressing programmes that Life Education Centres are able to provide.

### A positive impact

People often ask: "Does it work in preventing drug use?" Unfortunately this is very difficult to prove; however, we *can* say that the children



enjoy the sessions, and that each year they learn different aspects about looking after themselves. If young people have an enjoyable time and remember it so well, it has to go a long way towards influencing their thoughts and decision-making skills in a positive way.

In a National Evaluation of Life Education Centres, 99% of teachers said that Life Education had a positive impact on children, and 93% of children gave Life Education the highest rating possible.

Fiona Johnson graduated from Warwick University as a primary teacher. She spent a year at the YMCA National Centre in the Lake District and another year teaching in a junior school before going to Weymouth in 1991 to help set up the West Dorset Life Education Centre. She can be contacted at the Centre's address, 8 Portwey Close, Weymouth, Dorset DT4 8RF (01305 786061). For information about the Life Education Centres UK operations contact their central office (0171 600 6969).

#### Life Education Centres UK

Currently there are 19 mobile LEC classrooms seeing up to 300,000 children annually. This map shows the regions where these community-based centres operate.

1. Isle of Man +
2. Humberside +
3. Bradford ⊙
4. Wigan ★
5. Manchester/Merseyside I & II ⊛
6. Nottingham ●
7. Wales I – IV ■
8. Birmingham I & II ▲
9. Bedford ▼
10. Essex ◆
11. Greater London (2) & Docklands ◆
12. West Dorset \*

