

IMPEDIMENTS TO COMMUNICATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES AFFECTED BY SUBSTANCE ABUSE

I believe there are probably as many impediments to good communication between schools and families affected by substance abuse as there are students who are actively using drugs. In my experience, though, over the past seven years, the top two impediments seem to be parental denial and the school's perceived role in child development.

Parental denial is as natural a reaction as any other defense mechanism and it is pervasive. With substance abuse at epidemic levels, it is affecting more "good" homes than ever before and parents who have instilled a traditional value system into their family life just can't believe that the problem has come to their home to roost. Usually, the denial ends only when the abuse reaches "crisis" level, and the affected person's health, performance, or social interaction is severely damaged. It also tends to end when the addict gets expelled from school or arrested.

The schools, likewise, are in conflict between their perceived role as educators and their moral obligation to recognize and confront symptoms of drug use. There is generally no reward for teachers, counselors or school districts that become active in ferreting out drug users and informing the parents of their suspicions; on the contrary, parental reaction is often angry, hostile and litigious. With school violence on the rise (often due to drug use), the "zero tolerance" policy which now prevails throughout the country also interferes with good communications.

How do we deal with these impediments? I think some of the answers are: keeping the epidemic in the forefront of media coverage; giving our schools more confidence in the outcome if they try to help identify kids in trouble; actively supporting groups like this one; and most importantly, helping parents understand that this affliction can and does affect ANY family, regardless of the social, economic or religious environment in which the children are raised.