

Joel's Reinforcement Library

NEVER TAKE ANOTHER PUFF!

Kids Just Don't Get It!

I wrote a letter to John - WhyQuit's founder - in February 2000, shortly after we met. John and I were discussing presenting youth programs when he said to me that he had started smoking to impress a girl and would have given up his big toe for a chance at a date. In that she smoked, John thought smoking would somehow help in this effort. Much of the following article was part of my response to John. The reasons people give for starting to smoke are not the reason that they continue.

Kids just don't get it! On the surface the preceding sentence explains why kids are smoking at such an alarming rate. Here we have a product that is deadly, so deadly in fact it has been deemed the most preventable cause of premature death in almost all developed nations. Many who don't die from cigarettes will still become impaired or crippled from them. Not only are cigarettes deadly, they're expensive, too. Kids taking up smoking today are likely to spend their entire life dependent upon a product that will end up costing them tens of thousands of dollars. But today, kids are still taking up smoking in record numbers. What is the only logical explanation for this tragedy?

Again, it must be that kids just don't get it. But don't be too quick to interpret my meaning of this phrase. Yes, there are some kids who no matter what you teach them will not listen to any amount of reasoning. But this is not the majority of kids taking up smoking. When I say kids don't get it, I don't mean kids lack the common sense to make a rational decision about smoking. What they don't get is the real information in a manner that helps them understand the magnitude of the danger and the power of the addiction. Without such understanding they are not equipped with the ammunition to overcome peer pressure, as well as tobacco promotion tactics by cigarette manufacturers.

When I try to offer programs to many local schools, free of charge mind you, I often get turned down for the reason that they can't take time out of the busy education schedule required in schools today. Besides this, the school officials often feel kids already are getting the facts about smoking in health classes and DARE presentations. This is all well and good, except the message delivered in these programs is often presented quickly and most truly skim the surface of the depth of the nicotine addiction. I know when I do a school for the first time, the kids are amazed at the stories I relate about the dangers of smoking and the strength of addiction. More important than this though, it almost never fails that the health teacher comes up to me and tells me that he or she never understood the magnitude of the problem.

Recently, I spoke at a conference where representatives from many health organizations were coming to find out how to possibly obtain funding from tobacco settlement monies. The DARE officers present came up to me afterwards shocked about how dangerous smoking actually was. It was apparent that the people who were being relied upon to do the education didn't understand the dangers themselves. The authorities in the schools who should have been responsible for making sure that students were actually being taught the dangers, were not working to make the information available to the students because they were under the false impression that it was being adequately covered by poorly-informed DARE officers.

Kids can get it if it is given to them. It's not only a financial limitation that this material is not disseminated. It is a lack of resolve and commitment by the public that allows this to happen. Parents should be demanding this information for kids. PTA groups should be screaming to increase the educational component of smoking prevention. But unfortunately, most of them don't get it either. How often does a parent react to their child smoking by saying, "Well at least they are not using drugs." There are so many problems faced by kids today such as drugs, alcohol and violence that smoking seems minor in comparison.

What parents and other responsible adults fail to understand is that smoking is going to kill more children than all the other problems combined. Their child has picked up an addiction that is likely going to kill him or her. What do I mean by likely? Well for every thousand 20-year olds who smoke today and don't quit, six of them will eventually die prematurely from being murdered (violence), 12 will eventually die prematurely from accidents, and 500 will die from smoking! "But, at least they are not using drugs." Understand that when parents say this or think this they don't get it either. It is likely that the parents never learned the full extent of the dangers or the addictive properties of nicotine while they

were young either.

John, you made the comment that you would have given up your toe for Kimberly back when you were a kid. Think about it though, do you really think you would have given up your toe? If I was there with a chainsaw and made a promise that I would guarantee you a date with Kimberly if you let me lop off your toe, would you have accepted my offer? Probably not, and this analogy is not as far fetched as it may sound on the surface. There are people who end up losing toes, fingers, feet, hands, legs, and arms from peripheral vascular diseases caused by smoking. Their doctors often give them the choice to quit smoking or lose the limb, but they really don't have a choice. They are addicts who lost control. Kids need to understand the extent of that control before they begin smoking. Not just that it smells bad, not that it makes your teeth yellow, and not that it is just "bad" for you. Kids think lots of things are bad for them. But tobacco is in a league by itself. When more kids get this information in its full non-diluted strength, more will have the ammunition needed to say no.

Peer pressure is a real phenomenon. Just telling kids not to give into it isn't enough. Give them the reason not to give into it. Give them the full unadulterated message of the deadly and addictive nature of nicotine. Give them a reason to say no and they will be more likely to say no. Let's make sure kids do get it and I think we will see a turn-around in current trends.

Joel

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