

Stories From the Field

But, What Will Happen to Me?

A young girl makes such an impression on CODA Educator Heather Hodgson Schleich, she writes about it in this edition of The CODA Report.



In my 11 years as a CODA educator, 17 years of policing and 10 years of teaching at the college level, I always felt that if I could positively affect at least one person, I had done my job. My undergraduate studies in psychology and my master's degree in distance education have equipped me with essential analytical and problem-solving skills but, sometimes, it takes listening to your heart to find the answer. Since my initial involvement as a CODA educator in 1997, I have had the opportunity to design, develop and deliver key drug abuse prevention programs targeting youth. I have developed the CODA *What If? Drug Awareness Program*, which uses an age-specific interactive storytelling approach to engage children from kindergarten through grade six. The program has been delivered mainly across Ontario, but has also been presented in other parts of Canada. As the CODA educator for the Grey/Bruce/Huron/Perth region of Ontario, I also deliver components of CODA's *Drugs and the Brain Program* which includes *Between Life and Death: The Crystal Meth Explosion*. As a CODA educator, I have also had the privilege of attending professional development and health-promotion forums, including the FOCUS/ODAP Symposium.

My career as a CODA educator has brought me many unique and enriching experiences working in-class with youth across Ontario and elsewhere in Canada. One such incident in particular stays close to my heart. I was delivering the *What If? Drug Awareness Program* to a grade two class at a school in a large urban centre. The area was predominantly populated by upper-middle-income families. I noticed a beautiful little girl with blond hair and blue eyes. Whenever I made eye contact with her, she looked down and fidgeted. Thinking that she was probably shy, I carried on without much concern.

When the bell rang for recess, the children swarmed me with hugs and had stories to share and questions to ask. This little girl stood back and waited until everyone else had left the room. Then she quietly came forward and stood looking into my eyes and asked: "Mrs. H., what if my mother does really bad drugs and drinks all the time? I can't ever see my dad or his family because they are really bad! So, what will happen to me when my mom dies?"

As she stared with pleading, tear-filled eyes, my mind raced, trying to draw on my police experience for an answer that she would comprehend. I shared with her a story modelling resiliency, in which a little mouse had a similar problem and stressed that it was important to know that her family's situation is not her fault. Then I asked her about other guardians in her family; her grandparents, she informed me, lived in Newfoundland and were 'really old'.

Looking to reassure and comfort her, I put my hand on her shoulder and said: "You know, this may not even happen." She almost broke into tears and repeated, "but, what will happen to me when she dies?"

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I told her that she was a beautiful, smart girl and that anyone would be happy to have her as part of their family; that, should something happen, I was sure that things would work out.

Her whole expression changed and she told me about her friend's mom and how much her friend's mom liked her. She felt that maybe this lady would look after her. With that, she thanked me, gave me a hug and skipped off down the hall to have recess.

I pulled myself together and went straight to the principal and shared the incident with him. School staff were unaware of this particular girl's circumstance. The principal assured me that he would check into things and that, at the very least, a network of support would be created for her.

As a drug abuse prevention educator, I feel that this is a clear indication of the effectiveness and impact of CODA programs. Best-practice models indicate that material for this age group must not only be factual and clear, it should be delivered using methods that address several learning styles and attention spans by reinforcing messages visually, interactively and through repetition. Following the session, the targeted class illustrated their learning of the program material through art work and comments, clearly demonstrating their comprehension and retention of the key messages.

Creating a safe, trusting environment and interaction between the session leader and engaged youth is another key element for successful drug abuse prevention programming. The children were open to the presenter and trusted the information that was provided. This was demonstrated not only by observations in the classroom, but also by the highlighted incident in which, after one program session, a child reached out to the CODA educator, disclosing information that she had not provided to her teachers or friends, seeking help. Not only did this child have a comfort level and trust which allowed her to come forward, but the material had been delivered in such a way as to make her believe that I would have the answers for her.

Protecting the confidentiality of our program recipients restricts the disclosure of further and/or followup information about this particular child, however, I am confident that this session did allow me to positively affect the life of one beautiful, smart and very brave little girl.

Heather D. Hodgson Schleich
CODA Educator since 1997