Teaching Responsible Drinking Skills

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TEACHING RESPONSIBLE DRINKING: FIVE PHILOSOPHIES

An Analogy Test

Prevent alcoholism by teaching responsible drinking? Is that a sensible idea? Consider the following multiple choice analogy. There is no one right or wrong answer, but probably one analogy will fit best or seem most true to you.

Trying to prevent alcoholism by teaching people how to drink is like trying to:

1. Prevent fire by striking matches
2. Prevent diabetes by giving people candy
3. Prevent gunshot wounds by teaching safe use of firearms
4. Prevent unwanted pregnancy by teaching about birth control
5. Prevent drowning by teaching swimming

Which analogy rings true for you?

Each of these analogies corresponds to an underlying philosophy regarding the teaching of responsible drinking as a preventive approach.
THE PROHIBITIONIST POSITION

"Trying to prevent alcoholism by teaching people how to drink is like trying to prevent fire by striking matches." This view regards alcohol as a volatile and destructive agent. To expose individuals to alcohol is to risk their becoming drawn into the abyss of alcoholism. From this vantage point, teaching "responsible" drinking is an anomaly (if not anathema), as senseless as lighting matches to prevent fires.

There are some things to be said for this view. Certainly people who never drink will never become alcoholic. The damage and suffering that can occur in relation to alcohol are undeniable and those who have been closest to such pain understandably can develop a total revulsion to alcohol and its use in any form.

The problem, of course, is that total prohibition has been found to be unfeasible as social policy in our society. Most people will be exposed to alcohol, probably before leaving their teen years. Although an "all or none" stance on alcohol may reduce the probability of drinking, it does not seem to prevent alcoholism and problem drinking. Like children of alcoholic parents, children from abstinent families have a higher risk of developing drinking problems if they drink.

THE DISEASE MODEL

"Trying to prevent alcoholism by teaching people how to drink is like trying to prevent diabetes by giving people candy." Here the analogy is drawn to the disease diabetes. Most people will not be affected in major adverse ways by candy. It may increase tooth decay or cause mood swings, but in most cases it is not dangerous. For the person with this disease, however, candy can be life threatening. By analogy, alcohol may not be very hazardous for most people, but for those with the disease of alcoholism, exposure can be harmful or fatal. This view is most often attributed to Jellinek (1960), who described "gamma alcoholism" as one of several different subtypes of alcoholism.

Again, there is support for this view. There is increasing evidence that genetic factors play an important role in certain kinds of alcoholism. There may be an inherited type of alcoholism associated with a more rapid development of the disease, with childhood history of hyperactivity or antisocial behavior, and with family history of alcoholism or affective disorders. Some people seem to be unable to drink alcohol in moderation and are best advised to abstain totally.

Yet it is clear that the disease model with its assumptions of irrevers-