
Dare to Make Change

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Introduction

Dare¹ to Make Change is a New Zealand community-based programme designed to help 'at risk' youth to gain control over their lives. It is offered by the D.A.R.E Foundation in cooperation with New Zealand Police Youth Education Service with funding from Telecom.

Participants' 'high risk' behaviour usually involves drug and alcohol abuse, criminal activity, self-destructive behaviour (such as prostitution and suicide attempts), vandalism, school truancy and school failure. These young people are often disliked by their peers and they commonly exhibit angry behaviours, blaming others for their own problems.

The key resource of the programme is the book '*Gem of the First Water*' by American (Auckland-based) psychologist Ron Phillips with Dan Brewer. The basis for the change process is therapeutic story-telling intervention, which utilises principles from a variety of sources including William Glasser's Reality Therapy.

The book is read in twenty one-hour sessions. The stories are followed by questions which invite children to reflect on their life experiences and:

- manage their feelings in positive ways;
- make appropriate decisions after considering alternatives;
- accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions;
- think before they speak/act;
- have the courage to change their lives;
- set personal goals and challenges and be committed to achieving these;
- develop a feeling of confidence and self worth;

- experience fun and fulfilment in their lives.

The stories involve a boy's journey into self-awareness. It is anticipated that listeners will identify with the central character, interact with the facilitator, develop trust, complete activities and gradually apply the concepts into their own lives. The participants are invited to identify the behaviours they would like to change and begin their own change process.

Young people are invited to join the programme on the basis of their 'out of control' behaviour. Facilitators are community members ... usually teachers, police, school counsellors, youth and health workers who have undergone a one-day training session. They are supported by a coordinator and a D.A.R.E Committee. The process of Reality Therapy is designed for small groups of up to six children in early adolescence.

The need for the programme was confirmed by Ministry of Education statistics which showed that 2226 students were suspended from Intermediate and Secondary Schools in the first term of 1997. Four hundred and fifty-two were suspended for verbally abusing teachers, 166 for theft, 126 for alcohol abuse, 80 for persistently smoking in school, 44 for vandalism, 17 for sexual misconduct, 16 for sexual harassment and 145 for 'other offences', which included two cases of arson. Most schools admitted that suspensions were a 'last resort' that did nothing to address the problems of the individuals. Access to support services was often very difficult, especially for those living outside the three major New Zealand cities (*The Press*, 4.4.1997:2).

A Ministry of Education report on 16 May 1997 showed that an additional 272 students had been excluded from school for verbally abusing teachers and 39 were suspended for making physical attacks on staff.

Research methodology

In 1997, the authors were commissioned to evaluate *D.A.R.E to Make Change* by surveying 69 facilitators, 116 participants

(aged 9-16 years) and parents. Sixty per cent of participants were males. Interviews took place in fourteen different locations in both the North and South Islands of New Zealand.

The interviews with programme participants took place up to two years after their involvement with *Dare to Make Change* had ended. Interview schedules involved both open-ended and closed questions for the collection of qualitative and quantitative data. The programme SPSS for Windows was used for data analysis.

Participants' survey

Participants had usually been invited to join the programme after coming to the notice of police and/or as a result of concerns registered by their teachers or parents. They had usually exhibited serious behaviour problems for a long time before joining the programme. Many had failed to respond to psychological treatment, counselling, anger management programmes, ADHD treatment and police intervention. Several participants had been excluded from between six and ten different schools.

Twelve boys were interviewed in two boarding schools. Four lived in foster homes. Sixty-three per cent of participants were members of two-parent families, 20 per cent lived with unsupported mothers and 6 per cent had a step parent. Seventeen per cent of participants had previously been in foster placements. Two groups of children were enrolled in Activity Centre programmes (ie. they had been excluded from schools many times).

Examples of benefits from the programme were reported by 81 per cent of participants. These benefits related to:

- acceptance of responsibility for own actions;
- stopping smoking;
- stopping stealing/trashing cars;
- stopping housebreaking and crimes of violence;
- stopping drunkenness;
- stopping 'doing drugs'.

A girl who had engaged in compulsive

theft for six years and failed to respond to counselling, psychological treatment and the justice system, stopped stealing after the third chapter of the book. This change of behaviour was confirmed by her parents and school.

Overall, the children claimed improvements in:

- anger management;
- self-esteem;
- peer and family relationships;
- consideration for others;
- ability to resist bad influences;
- accepting responsibility for own actions;
- drug and alcohol abuse;
- school attendance;
- school academic performance.

These improvements were confirmed by facilitators and the parents who were interviewed.

Although some participants said that they were 'bored' at the beginning of the programme, they gradually became absorbed and 'couldn't wait' for the next chapter. They rated the story as:

Very good	67 per cent
Good	22 per cent
OK	11 per cent
Not very good	1 per cent

Although the programme challenged participants to review their lives and behaviour, only 18 per cent said that they felt uncomfortable during the sessions. They rated the facilitators as follows:

He/she did a very good job	68 per cent
He/she did a good job	24 per cent
He/she was OK	8 per cent
There were no negative responses.	

There was strong evidence to the effect that identification with the character in the story was readily achieved. Respondents could see similarities such as selfishness, impulsiveness, refusal to listen, lying, behaving offensively, being 'big-headed' and self-centred. Up to two years after the programme, these young people were able to tell the researcher which parts of the story had affected them deeply. They often blamed teachers for contributing to truancy and poor school performance. They claimed consistently that English and Maths were taught in ways that ignored their developmental needs; they could not concentrate on 'boring chalk and talk' and needed to learn through activity methods. This learning style was well demonstrated during *Dare to Make Change* sessions attended by the

researcher. Although children were colouring the pictures from the story and sometimes asked for other colours and talked to neighbours about their work, they were able to answer all of the questions and discuss the relevance of the chapter with the facilitator.

Survey of participants' parents

All but two of the interviewed parents proclaimed the programme to be an astonishing success in changing their own as well as their children's lives.

Parents said that they needed:

- more dialogue with the facilitator;
- a copy of the book so that they could discuss it with their children after the programme ended and there was no external support;
- occasional parent workshops on positive child management strategies.

The most successful results took place when:

- parents were in contact with (but did not know) the facilitator;
- participants were in very small groups or 1:1 situations;
- parents acquired and practised new parenting methods which engaged their children in: taking responsibility for their action; problem-solving; making choices; and considering consequences.

As a result of these findings, a parent component has been designed and is being trialled in Dunedin.

Parents confirmed that their children enjoyed the programme. They praised the facilitators and said that involvement in *Dare to Make Change* had resulted in improved family communications and relationships, parenting styles, their children's decision-making skills, their acceptance of responsibility for their actions and a reduction in angry behaviour. One parent said that the *Dare* programme was '100 per cent successful when ADHD and anger management programmes had failed'.

Parents revealed that school bullying, scape-goating by teachers and home difficulties often contributed to their children's problems. For example:

- one parent died by suicide and the children had not been offered counselling;
- a mother was a heroin addict with a history of drug-related crime;
- a father suffered from a psychiatric illness which severely affected parent-child and family relations;

- some children felt unwanted in 'blended' step-families;
- some boys' fathers were members of criminal gangs.

Facilitators' survey

Ninety-seven per cent of facilitators were engaged in part or full-time paid employment. More than half held university degrees, 17 per cent at post-graduate level. Sixty-nine per cent of facilitators reported having high levels of satisfaction from using the *Dare to Make Change* programme. They reported a very large number of examples of positive changes in participants' attitudes and behaviour.

Facilitators engaged in small group work and produced records showing that 25 per cent of participants made 'dramatic' improvements in their social relationships, attitudes and behaviours within the first few weeks. Fifty per cent of participants showed 'substantial' improvements overall and only two boys were said to have deteriorated after membership of the programme. Parents confirmed that they had gained confidence and self-esteem, but that their behaviour had worsened. (It should be noted that, in larger groups, a minority of young people had been asked to leave the programme in the early stages because of inadequate attendance or excessively disruptive behaviour.)

It is also worth noting that twenty-eight facilitators in the South Island were student teachers who participated in the programme in a 1:1 way, as part of their health curriculum field experience. Unfortunately, at the time of the interviews, these students had graduated and dispersed, but participants and parents spoke highly of their efforts.

Problems for facilitators

a) Lack of school support

The researchers and D.A.R.E. Committees were surprised to note that 39 per cent of facilitators identified 'lack of school support' as their greatest problem in delivering the programme. In many cases, lack of support bordered on sabotage. This may be explained in terms of sheer disbelief that a programme involving story-telling could influence children for whom a range of professional support services (including the teachers themselves) had failed. Teachers often made negative and cynical comments to researchers about the popularity and success of the programme and the Police Education Officers, predicting that

improvements in behaviour would only be short-term.

Class teachers also argued that children enjoyed attending sessions and, therefore, the programme 'rewarded them for bad behaviour when they really deserved to be punished'.

Teacher who were also facilitators reported that their colleagues used the programme to threaten or criticise participants for minor misdemeanours making statements such as:

That programme isn't doing you much good. It's a waste of time sending you (after one session).

If you don't produce better work, I'll stop you from going to the Dare session.

Teachers who were also facilitators reported that their group members often missed sessions because:

- they were detained by the teacher responsible for the previous class;
- they were removed by the principal as a punishment for misbehaviour elsewhere.

In addition, some teachers reported that, although comfort is important, they were given the least comfortable rooms in the school, the accommodation changing from week to week. One said that she had to provide her own heater. In another school, sessions were held in the dental surgery, complete with dental chair and equipment. Others reported that young people who were suspended from school for bad behaviour were forbidden to attend their group. Given that these were the students in greatest need, some teacher-facilitators moved to other premises.

b) Safety factors

Safety factors caused concern. Some male facilitators were working in 1:1 situations that were potentially unsafe. Police Education Officers ensured that another adult was present when they worked with adolescents who were known to be sexually experienced, but community members were much less cautious. One of the difficulties for facilitators was that young people did not respond well when sessions were held in their own homes and family members were in adjacent rooms. Participants were unable to discuss their own lives for fear of being overheard. Participants were also wary if the facilitator was a family friend or socially acquainted with their parents. Some female European-New Zealand facilitators experienced

difficulties with groups of Pacific Island and Maori youths.

It was noted that, when several children were removed from different classes to create a new group, boys invariably behaved disruptively in an attempt to gain dominance. Difficult behaviours occurred for up to 3-4 weeks until the boys began to identify with the character in the story.

Suggestions for improving the programme

Facilitators were asked to provide suggestions for how the programme could be improved. The most frequent response related to extending training to include group management skills, handling reports of sexual abuse and other crimes, and strategies for working with difficult children.

The need for separate parent involvement was emphasised. Parents realised that home and school environments often contributed to children's problems and, for long-term change, parents needed to adopt different parenting strategies.

Third, it was argued that there should be 'follow-up calls' to children after the programme ended, e.g. after one month, three months, six months and one year. Parents pointed out that the programme ended on a high note and the relationship with the facilitator suddenly ceased. Some participants went into a state of grief and some began to 'wilt' one month after the support structure had suddenly been removed.

Girls said that they would prefer to be in single-sex groups because boys of the same age tended to be less mature and they engaged in attention-seeking behaviours when placed in new mixed situations.

Other suggestions for improvement included adaptation of the story to make it more suitable for Maori children.

Conclusion

Facilitators, participants and parents confirmed that *Dare to Make Change* is successful in changing young people's negative attitudes and behaviours. The programme organisers accept that some of the success may be attributed to the fact that participants receive one-to-one attention from a kind, non-judgemental person with whom they create a close, trusting relationship. Given their home backgrounds, this is likely to be a new experience for many young people.

The most successful programmes were those which involved 1:1 or small groups with a firm but kind facilitator and some degree of parent involvement accompanied by changes to parenting styles.

For further information relating to *Dare to Make Change*, contact Owen Sanders, New Zealand Police National Headquarters, Molesworth Street, Wellington (PO 3017) Tel. (64) 4 4951 307 FAX 4749 417 e.mail o.sanders@xtra.co.nz.

1 Dare (D.A.R.E) is the acronym for Drug Abuse Resistance Education

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