

Breaking the cycle of drug and substance abuse in children at risk in vulnerable communities through after school social activities and the ‘read for your life’ community book club intervention

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Substance abuse has overwhelming challenges on families and the community. Children who are raised in homes where there is a substance abuser are at a greater risk of becoming substance abusers later in life. One such research study which was carried out in Zimbabwe revealed the following key findings; the study indicated that prevalence of drug abuse is at 57% among young people, the most commonly abused drugs and substances are marijuana and alcohol. Peer pressure, breakdown of the family support system, limited knowledge about the effects of drug abuse and stress were identified as the major factors that drive substance and drug abuse among the youth. According to the beer and soft drink company Delta Beverages, Zimbabweans consumed almost 200 million hectolitres of its lager beer and more than 330 million hectolitres of opaque (millet) beer in 2012 (Moyo, 2018). The economic situation in our country has left many people unemployed and in dire circumstances and alcohol/drug abuse becomes a way to avoid the suffering and pain born by poverty. Children living in these communities have shown a considerable number of behavioural and psychosocial problems. The research targeted children who are raised in a community known for drug and substance abuse mainly by youth and the parental figures. The ages of the children from the ages of six to twelve. Research has shown that children who grew up with either parent who abuses substances/drugs is either abused or neglected, a parent with a substance use disorder is 3 times more likely to physically or sexually abuse their child. A sample of 14 children aged between 6 and 12 was collected through snowball sampling. Preliminary data was collected using the PSC-17 (Pediatric symptom checklist). The following results were collected, 86% of the children scored above the positive 15 score, which indicated presence of either attention, internalising or externalising disorders. The children also scored high on the externalising and attention subscales. Data was collected also through in-depth interview from either parent/primary caregiver. The major themes that were extracted from the in-depth interviews with either parents or caregivers showed neglect, abuse, poverty and a torn social fabric within our communities as some of the causes of substance abuse. Hence the social book club intervention crafted was mainly to improve on the children’s attention and for them to focus on the positive outlook of life through children’s story books, to influence positive behaviour and building their esteem. The old adage, “catch them young” is true in this respect. What we have is a problem that we fairly know the causes and now we have to focus our energies on not only rescuing those already fighting substance abuse but also channelling our energy to help prevent this ongoing cycle. Having grassroots community initiatives in high risk communities would prove futile. Awareness raising campaigns should be done and include the children as well, targeting even those in primary schools. The greater part for us in Zimbabwe would be advocating for a change in policy on drug and substance abuse.