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Program's focus on inner strength helps turn young drug users around

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VANCOUVER -- Not long ago, Joe Goodwill's teenaged daughter was drinking and doing drugs with an unsavoury group of friends.

However, yesterday morning, the 16-year-old was up at seven to go to the gym with her father. Mr. Goodwill said that a few months before, she was never out of bed before noon.

"I was just worried about her all the time," he said. "She's almost an adult. I can't control her completely. I couldn't keep her in lockdown. I just had to figure out how to keep her safe while living in this city."

A frustrated Mr. Goodwill was directed to the School-Aged Children and Youth Substance Abuse and Prevention Program by a counsellor at his daughter's school. The drug-use prevention program focuses on the personal strengths of its subjects rather than simply the drug use. Mr. Goodwill credits the program for his daughter's turnaround.

"It was just about communication," he explained. "I took a step back and put it into perspective and said, 'She's still basically the same person and let me respect and love her for who she is.' "

The approach, said SACY advocates, is much more effective than the traditional "Say no to drugs" campaigns in many public schools. SACY takes into consideration the youth's entire life - factors such as language, religion and personal passions - then works on the positive aspects to help give them direction. The Vancouver School Board hopes the program will catch on in British Columbia, and eventually nationwide.

"We think that every child in Vancouver should be exposed to this program," said Clarence Hansen, chairman of the board of school trustees. "It gives children an awareness of who they are, and what their goals are, and what passions they have in life. And [shows how] drug and alcohol abuse affects these goals."

The board hopes to get \$1.2-million from Health Canada to expand the program throughout the district. And it has just joined with another anti-drug program, Vancouver's Four Pillars Drug Strategy, which was created in 2001 and focuses on prevention, treatment, harm reduction and enforcement.

Ann Livingston of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users said she'd like to see SACY's expansion attempt succeed.

"It's a nurturing, positive program that strengthens the resolve of the people in it," she said. "It's a much better approach than older programs they've been shoving down kids' throats."

Ms. Livingston said other programs attempt to scare youth away from drugs instead of working with them to help steer them away.