

Rat Park

Rat Park refers to a scientific experiment in the late 1970s that called into question the common understanding of addictive drugs. Professor Bruce Alexander and his students at Simon Fraser University showed that living conditions, not drugs, were the issue. Our environment greatly influences whether or not we use drugs, how much we use, how often, and where.

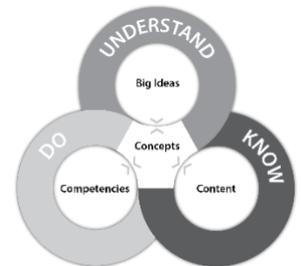
This instructional example provides two alternative stimuli through which to introduce this material to Grade 6/7 students and a variety of instructional strategies appropriate for different learning styles and curricular subjects.

The point of this learning activity is not to focus on drugs or addiction. Those issues are the backdrop, but the point is to re-focus attention to those factors that provide the foundation for wellness (including dealing with drugs).

Links to Curriculum

Core competencies addressed

- Communication
 - Connect and engage with others (to share and develop ideas)
 - Acquire, interpret, and present information (includes inquiries)
 - Collaborate to plan, carry out, and review constructions and activities
 - Explain/recount and reflect on experiences and accomplishments
- Creative thinking
 - Generating ideas
 - Developing ideas
- Critical thinking
 - Analyze and critique
 - Question and investigate
 - Develop and design
- Social responsibility
 - Contributing to community and caring for the environment
 - Building relationships



First Peoples' Principles of Learning addressed

- Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors.
- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).

Big ideas addressed

- Engaging in creative expression and experiences expands people’s sense of identity and community **(Arts Education 6)**
- Through art making, one’s sense of identity and community continually evolves **(Arts Education 7)**
- Experiencing art is a means to develop empathy for others’ perspectives and experiences **(Arts Education 6)**
- Experiencing art challenges our point of view and expands our understanding of others **(Arts Education 7)**
- Exploring text and story helps us understand ourselves and make connections to others and to the world **(English Language Arts 6/7)**
- Exploring and sharing multiple perspectives extends our thinking **(English Language Arts 6/7)**
- Healthy choices influence our physical, emotional, and mental well-being **(Physical and Health Education 6/7)**
- Learning about similarities and differences in individuals and groups influences community health **(Physical and Health Education 6/7)**

Drug literacy big ideas addressed

- Drugs can be tremendously helpful and also very harmful
- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives

Competencies and content explored

Arts Education 6/7	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create artistic works collaboratively and as an individual using ideas inspired by imagination, inquiry, experimentation, and purposeful play • Interpret and communicate ideas using symbols and elements to express meaning through the arts • Express, feelings, ideas, and experiences through the arts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • image development strategies • symbolism and metaphor to explore ideas and perspective • personal and collective responsibility associated with creating, experiencing, and performing in a safe learning environment
English Language Arts 6	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a variety of comprehension strategies before, during, and after reading, listening, or viewing to construct meaning from text • Use personal experience and knowledge to connect to text and develop understanding of self, community, and world • Exchange ideas and perspectives to build shared understanding • Use writing and design processes to plan, develop, and create texts for a variety of purposes and audiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • elements of non-fiction texts • oral language strategies • metacognitive strategies • writing processes
English Language Arts 7	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply appropriate strategies to comprehend written, oral, and visual texts, guide inquiry, and extend thinking • Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts • Respond to text in personal, creative, and critical ways • Exchange ideas and viewpoints to build shared understanding and extend thinking • Use writing and design processes to plan, develop, and create engaging and meaningful literary and informational texts for a variety of purposes and audiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • elements of non-fiction texts • oral language strategies • metacognitive strategies • writing processes
Physical and Health Education 6/7	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and describe factors that influence healthy choices • Describe and apply strategies for developing and maintaining positive relationships • Explore strategies for promoting the health and well-being of the school and community • Describe and assess strategies for promoting mental well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strategies to protect themselves and others from potential abuse, exploitation, and harm in a variety of settings • strategies for managing personal and social risks related to psychoactive substances and potentially addictive behaviours • influences of physical, emotional, and social changes on identities and relationships
Social Studies 6	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use Social Studies inquiry processes and skills to: ask questions; gather, interpret, and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions • Make ethical judgments about events, decisions, and actions that consider the conditions of a particular time and place, and assess appropriate ways to respond 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • global poverty and inequality issues, including class structure and gender
Social Studies 7	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use Social Studies inquiry processes and skills to: ask questions; gather, interpret, and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions • Determine what factors led to particular decisions, actions, and events, and assess their short- and long-term consequences • Make ethical judgments about past events, decisions, and actions, and assess the limitations of drawing direct lessons from the past 	

<p>Drug Literacy (For a complete look at the drug related competencies, as defined by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC at University of Victoria, see: https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-pp-drug-curriculum.pdf)</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and societies • Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs • Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use • Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs • Develop personal and social strategies to manage the risks and harms related to drugs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the social, political and health impacts of various patterns of drug use • the role of individual experience, ideas and agency as they impact attitudes and behaviours related to drug use • the relationship between political, economic and social factors related to drug use • the relationship of inequity to the harms related to drug use • the interconnected relationship of personal, drug and environmental factors in understanding risk, benefit and harm related to drug use • the emotional and social appeal of drug use • self-examination and the exploration of ideas without immediately passing judgement • decision-making skills that incorporate rational processing and emotional regulation • support and leadership skills within peer group, family and community

Instructional strategies

Begin by familiarizing students with the Rat Park story. You might display or distribute the [Rat Park comic strip](#) by Stuart McMillen. Alternatively, you may want to use this [short video](#) about Rat Park. Then use one or more of the strategies below to encourage critical and creative engagement.

1. Help students explore the meaning of the Rat Park experiment through inquiry. You might start by having students work in small groups to draft a list of questions that arise from the Rat Park story. Encourage students to develop open questions that push them beyond the content. Open questions often begin with “why” rather than “what” (e.g., “Why did the rats in cages behave differently from those in Rat Park?” rather than “What happened to the rats in the cages?”) Then encourage students to share some of their questions and facilitate a class discussion. You might cluster some of the questions into themes like those below and supplement their questions with some of those supplied.

Reminder: The intent is not to answer the students’ questions but to engage them in discussion that helps them answer their own questions.

Freedom

- a. Which rats were more free?
- b. Do you think freedom is important? What does freedom mean to you?
- c. Was freedom related to why some rats were healthy and others killed themselves? Explain.
- d. Can we ever be completely free? Explain.
- e. When is a lack of freedom a problem? Could freedom ever be a problem? Explain.

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Connection

Why did the rats in isolation use so much of the drug?

- a. Do you think rat behaviour is similar or different than human behaviour? Explain.
- b. Is being able to do things with friends important? Why or why not?
- c. What are some things in our community that might make people feel isolated or caged?
- d. Can humans ever get into trouble when they use alcohol or other drugs with friends? Give examples. How can friends help each other?

Support

- a. Why do you think the rats in cages behaved differently from those in Rat Park?
 - b. Do you think a similar experiment done with humans would have had similar results? Why or why not?
 - c. How can we help each other live healthy lives?
 - d. Do the results of the Rat Park experiment help us know what to do? Explain.
2. Have students write a paragraph or short essay on the topic: What I learned from Rat Park, and what I can do about it.
 3. Use an art project to encourage understanding and empathy. Invite students to imagine how the rats were feeling when caged and when in their park. Then have students express those feelings in side by side images of what they imagine the rat in the cage might produce versus a rat in the park. You might extend the exercise by having students display their art work and encourage students to look for new meaning or see something important that they would not have understood without comparing. Allow time to discuss their observations.

An alternative: Have students work in teams to make 3-D models of a healthy “Human Park” after discussing their thoughts about what a comfortable, natural habitat for humans would contain, look and feel like, and why.

4. Engage students in assessing your school’s or broader community’s environment. How well do they support active, healthy living? Then encourage students in taking action to create an environment where young people (and all!) are happy, healthy and connected.
 - a. Begin by inviting students to think about Rat Park and its implications for humans – and in particular young people like themselves. What was different about the park habitat? What kind of effect would the caged environment have on them? Do they ever feel that way? What sort of environment makes it easy to connect with others, run, jump, play and have some fun?
 - b. Go for a tour to see how well your school or neighbourhood supports free, active, healthy living and facilitates people connecting and enjoying each other. Encourage students to take notes and pictures along the way to document anything they would like to see addressed.
 - c. Encourage students to reflect on what they saw and be prepared to share next class.
 - d. For the start of the next class, plan an activity that picks up on the ideas of Rat Park. It might be an obstacle course that’s full of fun things to do? A game of tag in a nearby forest or playground?
 - e. Using sticky notes, invite each student to post one observation and an idea about what can be done to improve the environment. Discuss and expand on these ideas as a class.

- f. Using a decision making process like the [nominal group technique](#), identify 2-3 action items, as a class the students would like to work on – and support them to go for it! (Some of what they’d like to do may require some support from an adult ally or two.)

An Example

Students could imagine what would make their recess time more Rat Park-like. They might decide to form a band of “recess ambassadors” or “play leaders” to share and implement some of their ideas on how to make recess time more fun for all. For more prompts and tips see [Recess Revival](#).

Additional Tips and Information for Teachers

- The concept of “mental health” is often confused with “mental illness”. The Physical and Health Education curriculum focus on “mental well-being” recognizes that everyone falls somewhere on a continuum between optimal mental health and poor mental health, independent of the presence or absence of a mental illness¹. From this perspective, classroom-based and whole-school strategies can be geared to enhancing the positive mental health and well-being of all students, including those with and without identified mental health challenges.
- Teachers have an important role to play in fostering the mental well-being of their students, though they do not require specialized or expert knowledge to do so (i.e. they are not expected to play the role of psychologist or counsellor). As a guide, teachers may understand their role to include:
 - supporting students to understand how to foster and maintain positive mental health and well-being, and thereby enhance their readiness to learn;
 - creating a welcoming and safe classroom/school environment;
 - highlighting methods to enhance both physical and mental well-being such as adequate sleep, physical activity, healthy eating and stress management techniques;
 - helping students to recognize the signs of common mental health concerns;
 - guiding students to trustworthy information and resources related to mental health;
 - supporting students to know how to seek assistance when needed; and,
 - challenging common stigmas related to mental health.
- There are a number of simple, everyday practices that teachers can use to supplement their instructional approaches to mental well-being. Examples include:
 - increasing opportunities for physical activity
 - taking students outside, even for a short time, to help them to restore readiness to learn
 - leading a circle check-in, where every student has a chance to voice their perspective

¹ Consider that “mental health” and “mental illness” can be viewed as two separate but related concepts. From this perspective, someone could have optimal mental health (feeling good about and functioning well in life) while experiencing a mental illness. Conversely, someone without a mental illness could have poor mental health.

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- intentionally strengthening their relationship with students through personal conversations
- For students who are experiencing a problem related to their mental health, sources of support include:
 - talking to a school counsellor
 - Kids Help Phone #1-800-668-6868 (KidsHelpPhone.ca)
 - [Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre](#)
- Teachers are encouraged to think about their own mental well-being, and what strategies may be required to support it. A number of helpful health and wellness resources can be found on the [BC Teachers' Federation website](#).