

Alcohol education is a challenging area for schools to tackle effectively.

Dorothy Lepkowska reports on an evaluation of the Talk About Alcohol intervention programme

Helping pupils to avoid risky behaviour in adolescence and into adulthood has always proved challenging for schools. Should teachers confront issues such as alcohol, drugs and sex head-on? Or does discussing them too early encourage experimentation and contribute to the risk?

One strategy for helping and supporting young people in making difficult decisions, based on information and knowledge, appears to be effective.

An evaluation of the Alcohol Education Trust's (AET) Talk About Alcohol intervention programme, carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) over three years (2011-2015), shows that the scheme has had a significant impact on delaying the age at which young people start to drink.

The evidence-based and peer-reviewed programme, aimed at 11 to 18-year-olds, provides teachers with a structured approach to discussing issues around drinking, and includes a 100-page paper and online teacher workbook of lesson plans, worksheets, information sheets, games and ideas which can be adapted to suit the knowledge and experience of the age group.

Teachers also have access to the 500-page website, with further games and quizzes and dedicated sections for staff, pupils and parents. Schools are encouraged to involve parents and a booklet is available to this end, with opportunities for the AET representatives to address parents in school on how best to support their children.

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The evaluation, which began in 2011 and included a student questionnaire undertaken four times from year 8 to when the pupils were in year 11, examined the behaviour of two groups of pupils – one which had undertaken the programme (the intervention group) and a comparison group which had not, but might have acquired information in other ways.

The evaluation found that there was value in the early intervention approach of the programme and in returning to alcohol education at different stages in pupils' personal development as they become more likely, with age, to experiment with alcohol.

NFER researchers Sarah Lynch, Jack Worth and Sally Bradshaw found that students in the intervention group were significantly less likely to have had their first drink by the time they were 15/16-years-old – even though, by that age, knowledge about alcohol consumption and its effects on the two groups was roughly equal, with the comparison group having caught up with the intervention group.

Crucially, overall, the report said: "Fewer students in the intervention group than in the comparison group had ever been drunk or experienced binge-drinking, which is likely to be because more students in the comparison group had ever drunk alcohol."

However, when restricting analysis to those who had ever had an alcoholic drink, there was no statistically significant difference between the groups in prevalence of drinking to get drunk.

Across all students in the sample at age 15/16, 29 per cent of the intervention group and 37 per cent of the comparison group drank frequently.

The attitudes towards drinking were also marked between the two groups. The most common



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experiences among 15/16-year-olds when drinking alcohol were feeling relaxed and outgoing (48 per cent of all intervention students and 65 per cent of all comparison students) and forgetting about problems for a while (34 per cent and 49 per cent).

The analysis found noticeable increases in the proportion of students who had experienced some negative consequences of drinking alcohol.

For example, a quarter of the intervention group compared with 32 per cent of the comparison group had ever had a hangover; 18 per cent compared with 24 per cent respectively had ever got sick, while 17 per cent compared with 21 per cent had ever done something they regretted because of drink.

The proportions of students across the whole sample having these experiences were greater in the comparison group, but this could have been because the analysis found that more young people in that cohort drank alcohol overall.

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It is not only facts about alcohol and its effects that are important, but some of the lesson activities helped young people to cope better with the potential pressures around youth and alcohol consumption, the NFER study found.

The findings also highlight the strong influence of the family on the age of onset of drinking, and suggested that schools need to consider strategies around parental engagement.

Students with greater numbers of siblings, a poor relationship with their father, and who lived with someone who usually drank alcohol in the home had an increased likelihood of ever having had a drink.

"This suggests the importance of the AET information for parents, to support them in making responsible decisions about their own alcohol consumption, acting as role-models for their children, setting boundaries and knowing where their children are and who they are with," the study said.

An earlier analysis of the programme, *Talk About Alcohol: An evaluation of the Alcohol Education Trust's intervention in secondary schools*, published in 2013, interviewed teachers who had used the resources.

It found that staff who had delivered Talk About Alcohol thought they were a comprehensive, "ready-to-go" package which worked well in series and that the resources offered a good range of materials to work from, and were accessible to students.

They were particularly impressed with the short films, scenarios and role play, which worked well in the classroom. Overall, the programme was found to be "straightforward", engaging for students and could be effectively delivered.

Two teachers mentioned that their school had conducted an end-of-unit review of the sessions and

Tips for school leaders and teachers

- Revisit alcohol education at different key stages – for example, early intervention before they begin drinking (the average age of first drink is 13), before young people began to drink frequently (around age 15), and as they approach adulthood.
- Give young people the facts about alcohol and messages about responsible drinking. It helps to develop resilience, rehearsal strategies, and self-management skills to manage difficult situations.
- Consider how to engage parents in alcohol education programmes, as evidence highlights that family influences drinking behaviour.

they reported one or more of the following among students:

- Greater knowledge about alcohol and its effects on the body.
- Greater understanding of legal issues around alcohol e.g. buying alcohol by proxy.
- Greater awareness of drinking patterns among young people their age ("that not everyone is drinking").
- Feeling more prepared to avoid drinking if they want to.

The most recent NFER evaluation concluded: "The impact on delaying the onset of drinking is evidence that the Talk About Alcohol intervention is effective as an early intervention programme."

"The evidence suggests the value in a harm minimisation approach and in revisiting alcohol education at different stages – for example, via early

intervention before they begin drinking (the average age of first drink is 13), before young people begin to drink more frequently (around age 15), and as they approach adulthood.

"Giving young people the facts about alcohol is not the only factor likely to influence behaviour – helping young people to develop resilience, rehearsal strategies, and self-management skills to manage risk is also important. Messages about responsible drinking are important at this age."

• Dorothy Lepkowska is a freelance education writer.

Further information

You can view the full report at www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/AETX01. For more about the Talk About Alcohol programme and its resources, visit www.alcoholeducationtrust.org

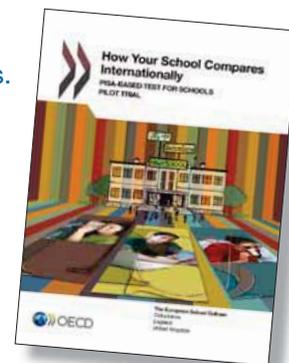

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