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 alcohol and access to a comprehensive, print 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 as in schools on how best to support their children.

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 which had 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 like, in experience 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 drunk alcohol or experienced binge-drinking, which is likely to decrease more students in the comparison group had drunk alcohol frequently.”

However, when restricting analysis to those who had ever had an alcohol 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 across was vital in the years leading to students leaving school.

By this age, students in both groups were admitting that having a drink was a fun and sociable thing to do, suggesting that getting the right messages are and who they are with,” the study said.

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 drunk.

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”, enabling for students and could be effectively delivered.

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

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

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

Tip 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.
- Help to develop resilience, behavioural 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.

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