

13.9 High-risk youngsters respond to coherent, consistent and interactive after-school activities

Findings Analyses of 48 US government-funded projects for 9–18-year-old children at high risk of drug problems found that only interactive, well structured projects with supported and engaged staff curbed progression to more frequent substance use.

The projects varied in setting (most were after or out-of school projects), approach, intensity and length (eight weeks to three years), but conformed to the same evaluation methodology, enabling impacts to be compared. The key measures were how far children in each project changed their cigarette, cannabis and alcohol use in relation to a local comparison group of similar children. At the start the 6031 project and 4579 comparison children were using these substances far more often than the US norm. Overall, the projects retarded further increases in frequency of use by around 10% and were particularly effective among the quarter of youngsters already using.

Report 1 sought to identify which projects had done most to curb substance use between the time they started and after they had ended. By this yardstick, the most effective had focused on substance-free recreational activities or used these and other means (eg, academic and vocational support) to develop personal and social lifeskills such as anger management and conflict resolution. Children in projects which instead focused on knowledge or boosting self-esteem actually did worse than comparison children. However, a lifeskills orientation only helped when the project *also* implemented this using interactive or experiential learning methods rather than passive lecture-style approaches. Interactive methods were particularly effective when they fostered ‘connectedness’ between children and adults through collective activities, mentoring and other social interactions, but were also effective when they helped youngsters examine the effects of their own attitudes and behaviours through role plays, group discussion, and the challenges of pursuits such as wilderness training. School projects were less effective than after-school activities, seemingly because a classroom setting constrained the extent to which projects could incorporate these positive features.


How projects were managed was also important. Those with an explicit rationale around which staff and activities could cohere were most effective, markedly so when this conceptual coherence was combined with consistent delivery of planned activities at set times. But (reports 2) even positively featured projects were only effective when their staff felt reasonably supported and satisfied with their work, and the greatest impacts emerged from projects whose staff felt empowered to work effectively with the youngsters.

Compared to these qualitative dimensions, the projects’ duration and intensity were less important, though the half active for the most hours per week (at least 3.3) were most effective.

The few projects which combined most of these positive features curbed the growth of substance use substantially more than whatever usual responses were being made to comparison children; the remainder were ineffective. Moreover, children who had experienced these projects continued to use cannabis, cigarettes and alcohol less frequently six months (25% less than comparison children) and 18 months (14% less) after the projects had ended.

In context Despite lacking detail on how the children were selected and on recruitment rates, this work represents a major advance on the previously patchy research on intervening with high-risk youngsters. It confirms the importance of enabling children (whether high risk or not) to participate and interact with each other and with adults rather than being passive recipients of adult messages, and also confirms that the ability or willingness to run such programmes is more often found outside than inside formal schooling. Other effective work with high-risk youngsters has involved interactive family skills training for both parents and children, bringing them together to practise more constructive interactions. In Britain, interactive youth work projects which respond to young people’s priorities and which, rather than focusing on drugs, address broader vocational, lifeskills and health issues, have been found to be most attractive to high-risk teenagers.

Practice implications Though relevant to prevention in general, the lessons of this study are particularly relevant to initiatives such as the Positive Futures projects in England and Wales, which offer marginalised 10–19-year-olds mainly sports-based activities intended to prevent substance misuse and reduce social exclusion. Lessons relating to content (lifeskills) and teaching methods (interactive) are familiar from programmes aimed at children in general. Equally important is the less familiar lesson (but one also found in school drug education) that these will not be effectively delivered unless staff understand and feel comfortable with the underlying approach, are adequately supported, and given the resources to mount coherent, consistent programmes.

Featured studies 1 Springer J.F. *et al.* “Characteristics of effective substance abuse prevention programs for high-risk youth.” *Journal of Primary Prevention*: 2004, 25(2), p. 171–194  [US] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *The national cross-site evaluation of high-risk youth programs*. 2002. Series of monographs available at: www.health.org/govpubs/FO36.

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Thanks to the health education consultant [Blaine Stothard](#) for his comments.

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