

4.14 Everyone's not doing it – important prevention message for early teens

Findings Correcting unrealistic beliefs about how normal drinking is – the 'everyone's doing it' fallacy – is a feasible way for school programmes to reduce excessive alcohol use.

Unusually, the curriculum tested in the US Alcohol Misuse Prevention Study (AMPS) aims to reduce alcohol *problems* rather than use. It begins in grade six (ages 11–12) with eight lessons primarily intended to improve pupils' ability to resist peer influences, followed over the next two years by nine 'booster' sessions. Comparison of AMPS and matched control schools suggested that the lessons did retard growth in alcohol problems, but only among the minority of pupils who had already drunk without adult supervision.

A previous study had found that the lessons worked partly by bolstering endorsement of reasons not to drink and reducing susceptibility to peer pressure. The featured study tested two further 'mediating' variables in a sub-sample of about 400 pupils whose refusal skills (ability to turn down an offer of alcohol from a friend) had been assessed in role play. Though improved by the curriculum, refusal skills were not related to excessive drinking nor did they account for the curriculum's impact on drinking up to grade 10 (age 15–16). However, pupils' overestimation of the prevalence of drinking among peers and adults was related to excessive drinking. Especially among older pupils (13–14), correcting these 'normative beliefs' partly accounted for the programmes's impact on excessive drinking.

In context Findings from AMPS suggest that while refusal skills have a role, correcting normative beliefs is the more powerful way to affect adolescent overindulgence in alcohol, and is easier to achieve in school lessons. Confirmatory findings have come from other studies. In a major Australian study, beneficial impacts on harmful drinking were also limited to pupils already drinking; a large US study found that a seventh-grade curriculum focused on normative beliefs reduced drug use relative to information only, while one focused on refusal skills tended to result in more drug use. **Additional reading.** Such findings are consistent with a theory of peer influence in which youngsters model what they see as accepted behaviour among their peer group rather than being pressured into these behaviours. In turn, adoption of these behaviours influences future friendship patterns.

In the latest AMPS study impacts on alcohol misuse were not entirely convincing, and the high proportion of pupils lost to the study reduces confidence in the findings.

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Education's uncertain saviour, issue 3, p. 4.

Practice implications School drug prevention programmes should incorporate teaching which corrects inaccurate beliefs about the normality and acceptability of drug use. If lesson time is limited, using it in this way would normally be more effective than teaching refusal skills. Normative beliefs are most relevant when the forms of drug use in question really are uncommon and not widely accepted among targeted pupils, but might be thought to be more common. Though experimentation with some drugs is practically normative among young people, regular use remains very far from normal. Stressing this message may be an effective antidote to overindulgence but may also be seen as condoning experimentation.

The findings raise the issue of targeting drug education (especially harm reduction education) at groups likely to benefit most, in this case identified by early unsupervised drinking. Targeting might make the best use of teaching time, but risks stigmatisation.

Norm-based teaching can employ knowledge-transfer and discussion methods more familiar to teachers than the skills needed to handle drug refusal role play. However, any education has a limited impact and should be supplemented by strong pastoral provision.

Featured studies Wynn S.R., et al. "Preventing alcohol misuse: the impact of refusal skills and norms." *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*: 2000, 14(1), p. 36–47. Copies: apply Alcohol Concern.

Additional reading Donaldson S.I. "Peer influence on adolescent drug use: a perspective from the trenches of experimental evaluation research." *American Psychologist*: September 1995, p. 801–802. Copies: apply DrugScope.

Contacts John Schulenberg, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248, USA, e-mail schulenb@umich.edu.