

9.11 Secondary school DARE ineffective without interactive extensions

Findings The first randomised trial of the DARE drug prevention curriculum for secondary school pupils found its police-led lessons ineffective unless supplemented by activities which involved pupils, parents, and communities as active participants.

Seventh or eighth grade pupils (age 12–14) in 24 randomly allocated US schools received either normal DARE lessons, 'DARE-plus', or neither (the controls). DARE-plus supplemented DARE with interactive elements involving parents and the community as well as pupils, allowing them to share or lead decision-making. It included training DARE officers in interactive teaching, a parent involvement strategy partly led by elected pupils, and extra-curricular youth activities and neighbourhood action teams organised by community workers.

Nearly 80% of the 6728 pupils were surveyed just before the programmes started and again after they had ended. Though there were positive trends, on no measure of drug use (alcohol, tobacco, cannabis) did DARE-only schools significantly improve on the controls. In contrast, among boys DARE-plus significantly retarded growth in smoking and drinking and in experience of physical victimisation, and led to significant or near-significant improvements in attitudes, beliefs and experiences thought to be underlying drug use and violence. Among girls, neither programme improved on the controls.

In context DARE's original primary school curriculum has been found ineffective compared to usual or alternative approaches. This study suggests that simply extending that approach into secondary schools will also be ineffective – especially disappointing since nearly all the children had been taught DARE in their previous schools. If the approach is effective, reinforcing it later should improve outcomes. DARE accepts that it must incorporate the lessons from such research. A new primary school curriculum has been developed and a more interactive secondary school curriculum is being evaluated.

LINKS Nuggets 4.14 2.15 1.13 1.11 •
Prevention is a two-way process, issue 5

The study's 'plus' elements (not to be confused with DARE's own PLUS supplement) were derived from Project Northland, a programme to prevent underage drinking with an unusually convincing research record. On their own (or with another classroom programme) these elements may have been as effective as adding them to DARE.

Practice implications DARE's major components are curriculum content, teaching methods, and teaching personnel. The first two are changing as DARE comes to grips with the evidence, but how far they can change may be limited by the third. The study adds to evidence that interactive teaching which allows pupils to influence content and methods is the most effective vehicle for drug education. Such teaching makes heavy demands on teaching skills and implies a willingness to allow children to interact on a contentious topic. Lessons may need to accommodate self-disclosure and pupil advocacy of a range of views, including those at odds with the law. There are question marks over whether police rather than teachers are best placed to do this work. While recognising their valuable role in stimulating and supporting drug education, research commissioned jointly by the Association of Chief Police Officers argued that police classroom input should be limited to drugs and the law. Forthcoming national guidance is expected to stress that, rather than substituting for the teacher, external contributors should be brought in only when they can provide educational inputs which the teacher cannot.

On the basis of results to date, the main benefits of DARE are relieving schools of the costs (financial and staff time) of drug education and potential improvements in relationships between police and schools/pupils. The first of these will be diminished if DARE further involves teachers. Schools keen to improve police relations but also to prevent drug problems may wish to await results from the new DARE curricula, or to implement a curriculum with a better preventive record and foster police-pupil relationships through other means.

Featured studies Perry C.L. *et al.* "A randomized controlled trial of the middle and junior high school D.A.R.E. and D.A.R.E. Plus programs." *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*: 2003, 157, p. 178–184. Copies: apply DrugScope.

Contacts Cheryl Perry, Division of Epidemiology, University of Minnesota, 1300 S. Second St., Suite 300, Minneapolis, MN 55454, USA, perry@epi.umn.edu.

Thanks to Alistair Lang of DARE (UK) and Niall Coggans of the University of Strathclyde for their comments.