

A fascinating experiment in European (Germany, Italy and Austria) **secondary schools** has tested the impact of ‘sampling’ abstinence from a favourite substance or other habit-forming activity **1**. The Initiated Abstinence programme asks pupils to contract with a schoolmate to give up or considerably reduce their chosen indulgence for two weeks. Beforehand, classes explore their current consumption profile and undergo exercises to sensitise them to their consumer behaviour. During the renunciation period a wall chart displays how they are coping. Afterwards successful renouncers receive a certificate. The responses of nearly 2000 12–15-year-olds were tracked through surveys four weeks before the programme, at the end, and three months later. In each school, pupils in non-programme classes were surveyed at the first and last time points. Allocation depended on teacher preference and administrative convenience.

All but a few of the pupils took part, generally choosing to renounce sweets, TV or computer games, but there seemed to be a spillover effect. Though rarely committing to it, substance users did commonly stop using or cut down during the two weeks. Three months later, compared to their initial usage, renunciation-class pupils had reduced or stabilised their substance use while it had increased in control classes. The benefits were greatest when the substance had been the pupil’s chosen renunciation but were apparent also (as stabilisation rather than reduction) when it had not. Pupils were generally enthusiastic about the initiative. They felt it was thought-provoking and that it had prompted them to change their behaviour.

1 Kalke J. *et al.* “Learning by doing: ‘Initiated Abstinence’, a school-based programme for the prevention of addiction.” *European Addiction Research*: 2004, 10(2), p. 88–94. **DS**