7.9 Growth in youth drinking curbed by correcting beliefs about the 'normality' of substance use

Findings A sophisticated reanalysis of data from the US Adolescent Alcohol Prevention Trial has confirmed that growth in drinking is held back by school lessons based on correcting 'normative beliefs' about how common substance use is among peers of a similar age.

The study had randomly allocated 12 schools with over 3000 pupils aged about 12–13 to a few lessons about the consequences of alcohol or drugs (the control condition) or to lessons covering the same ground plus either: resistance skill training; normative education; or both. Pupils' drug use was surveyed before the lessons and then yearly until they were aged 16–17. Earlier reports had established that adding normative education reduced cannabis, tobacco and alcohol use relative to information-only lessons, while adding refusal skills created no extra reductions. The pupils' refusal skills and normative beliefs both improved, but only normative beliefs were related to drug use reductions.

The featured study reanalysed this data using statistical techniques capable of integrating the annual results within a single analysis and reliably estimating the 30% of missing data points. It confirmed that over the follow-up period, adding normative education to the basic lessons had significantly reduced drinking and smoking (recent and over the child's lifetime) and drunkenness. On all these measures, it also retarded age-related increases in the prevalence and frequency of use. As in previous analyses, adding refusal skills had no consistent impact. In later years the growth in smoking and drinking after basic education slowed down, meaning that the advantage gained by normative education narrowed as the pupils put years between themselves and the lessons.

LINKS Nuggets 6.9 4.14 2.14 2.13 1.11

In context This work suggests that normative education can delay the onset of substance use and reduce its intensity in early adolescence, outcomes thought to reduce the risk of substance-related problems in later life. Studies of other curricula for the same age range have also confirmed the preventive impact of correcting normative beliefs. However, in the featured study the nine-session normative option incorporated more than the name implies, such as developing non-drinking friendships and classroom discussion of what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate drinking. Teaching was done by specialists from outside the school, perhaps in a better position than classroom teachers to encourage frank discussion and to extract the added value from normative education.

Normative information with feedback on how the individual compares with those norms has been found to be a restraining influence in other settings and populations. Particularly relevant are campaigns to tackle excessive drinking among students, some of which have reported positive results. In the general adult population, a mailed pamphlet encouraging recipients to compare their alcohol intake with national norms led to reduced drinking among concerned problem drinkers.

Practice implications Drug education correcting inaccurate beliefs about the normality and acceptability of drug use is likely to have a preventive as well as an educational impact. Clearly this is most applicable when the forms of drug use in question really are uncommon and not widely accepted among the pupils being targeted, but when they might be thought to be more common. In these circumstances, using classroom time to teach normative education would normally be more effective than using it to teach skills for refusing drug offers. Another advantage of norm-based teaching is that it can employ information-giving and discussion techniques familiar to teachers and pupils. However, any educational programme can be expected to have limited impact and should be supplemented by strong pastoral provision to identify and individually help children who show signs of developing damaging drug use patterns.

Featured studies Taylor B.J. *et al*. "Modeling prevention program effects on growth in substance use: analysis of five years of data from the Adolescent Alcohol Prevention Trial." *Prevention Science*: 2000, 1(4), p. 183–197. Copies: apply Alcohol Concern.

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