

7.10 In drug-related youth work, de-focus from drugs

Findings A rare [evaluation of drug-related youth work in Britain](#) stressed the importance of responding to the youngster's overall life situation, within which drug use may not be a major concern.

Nine Home Office-funded projects submitted monitoring data and in five, staff and attenders were interviewed and drug prevention work observed. Across the projects, the more freedom workers had to de-focus from drugs and relate to young people on their own terms, the more successful they were at working with problem drug users.

Few regular drug users were attracted to the structured programmes offered by centre-based projects and concerns other than drugs were usually far higher on their agendas. High (50% or more) drop-out was reduced by shorter programmes of a few weeks and by replacing set drug 'lessons' with flexible programmes responsive to the children's wants, incorporating vocational skills and health and lifestyle issues. Participative discussion and activities were seen as the most appropriate communication vehicles; the personality and interpersonal style of the worker were vital to their success.

Outreach workers were more likely to contact regular drug users but found 'cold-contacting' on the street difficult; repeat contact with people they already knew was the norm. As a result, projects re-focused to venues such as clubs frequented by young people at risk of drug use. Having something concrete to hand over (such as a leaflet) or administering a brief survey were useful conversation starters. Meaningful contact was more likely when the young person was experiencing drug-related problems (their own or someone else's), otherwise the approach risked being treated as an irrelevant intrusion.

In context Young drug users do not usually attend drug services until they have become adults with a drug problem which has already caused serious social and perhaps physical harm. Youth work has the potential to pick them up much earlier.

LINKS [Nugget 7.8](#)

The available reports (many descriptions rather than evaluations) generally support the study's conclusions and raise some additional points. A detailed, participative needs assessment and audit of local youth socialisation patterns characterises initiatives which have reached their target groups. So long as they are clearly seen as independent, projects and staff already known to young people through their work in colleges or schools have a head start in re-contacting them in other settings. In Northumbria, a drug-focused youth work project has successfully supported generic youth, education, primary care and social work staff in dealing with drug use among young people they are already in contact with.

Practice implications Youth work can act as a proving ground for approaches which involve young people sufficiently for them to choose to attend, informing work in situations such as schools where attendance is compulsory. Allowing the needs and objectives of the child to drive the agenda maximises uptake, a predetermined focus on drugs minimises it. Drug-targeted youth work can legitimately respond to these broader concerns (eg, education, work, training, school exclusion, legal involvement, family disharmony, finance) since these are often also factors which affect the risk of drug problems.

Ideally the work will be done by youth workers already in contact with young people in the area, who have some substance use knowledge, and who can access support from specialists in youth substance use. Establishing trust and independence from authority is likely to be hardest when working with those with the greatest reason to fear that authority. Outreach and detached work at neutral venues of young people's choosing (street, pubs, etc) helps establish the independence needed to work with problem drug users, but building trust requires a long-term, stable presence. This has obvious implications for stability of funding and for the development of career paths for youth workers which promote retention.

Featured studies Ward J. et al. [Drugs prevention through youth work](#). Centre for Research on Drugs and Health Behaviour, 2001. Full report from Centre for Research on Drugs and Health Behaviour, phone 020 7594 0791, fax 020 7594 0866. Summary from www.drugs.gov.uk/ReportsandPublications/Publications.

Additional reading [Nugget 7.8](#).

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Thanks to Adrian King of InForm, Reading, Berkshire for his comments.