

Research and evidence from practice show that young people's use of alcohol and drugs has an impact on their sexual choices and behaviour. This briefing highlights the implications of these findings for policy and practice, and offers recommendations for action.

Sex, alcohol and other drugs: exploring the links

A policy briefing

Introduction

The Sex Education Forum, the Drug Education Forum and NCB were funded to carry out a national development project focusing on the links between sex, alcohol and other drugs. Drawing on the findings of this project, a resource for practitioners has been published.

This project raised a number of issues that challenge current best practice in education, health and support services for young people. Much practice separates work on sex and relationships and work on alcohol and other drugs. All of the evidence from research, young people and professional practice suggests that more work is needed to help policy makers and practitioners explore and understand the links more effectively.

Some key areas have emerged for policy action if we are to successfully meet the targets set out in the Teenage Pregnancy Action Plan, the National Drug Strategy and the National Healthy School Standard. These are highlighted in this briefing and are followed by a series of recommendations for future policy attention.

Alcohol and other drugs

All of our work with young people and professionals emphasised the central place that alcohol plays in young people's lives: the majority of young people talked explicitly about alcohol. When questioned about other drugs, many of the young people were less able to relate this to their own or their peers' lives.

This challenges the emphasis on illegal drug use amongst young people led by the Home Office, and suggests the need for a much stronger focus on alcohol use, particularly binge drinking, from the Department for Education and Skills and the Department of Health.

Cultural change

As identified in the national Teenage Pregnancy Strategy, cultural change is needed to develop a more positive and open view of sex and sexuality. To help young people to look after their sexual health and manage their alcohol and drug use we need to:

- value their sexual development
- encourage their self-respect and confidence
- help them develop skills in assessing and managing risk.

We must recognise and accept that sex, alcohol and other drugs are part of the process of young people working out their place in the world and identifying what they want and do not want in their relationships. Young people talked frequently about a culture of demonisation in which they do not feel their sexual development is valued or respected. They suggested that making mistakes is not accepted and they need more support to learn from their mistakes and manage them successfully.

Young people also emphasised the importance of listening to their views and involving them in planning and implementing work on sex, alcohol and other drugs. Many young people talked about the importance of peer led interventions being developed. An interesting model of peer led intervention called Peer Sexuality Support Students has been developed in New Zealand, which deserves further investigation.

Joining up

Practitioners need to understand that young people do not isolate and separate personal and social issues; the issues are more 'joined up' for young people. Practitioners also need to think about how they can provide education, health services and support that reflect the realities of young people's lives.

Central to this joining up is the recognition of the coordinated skills development and values clarification work that underpins effective emotional and social development. Starting emotional and social development work with very young children on issues of risk and safety provides a positive foundation from which to develop specific work on sex, alcohol and other drugs later on as they grow and develop.

Direct interventions focusing on sex (including pregnancy and infection), alcohol and other drugs are undoubtedly important. However, young people described the lack of opportunities, including youth provision and transport, as factors that influence their behaviour. Therefore, any attempts to address the issues must be seen in the broader policy context of play, recreation and leisure provision and opportunities for young people.

Vulnerability

While all young people need support on exploring the links, there are some groups of young people who need particular support as a result of poor life experience, prejudice, stigma and exploitation. These include:

- young people in public care
- young people in the secure estate
- young gay, lesbian and bisexual people
- young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds
- young people with poor mental and emotional health
- young people at risk of sexual exploitation
- young people from violent families and families that use alcohol and other drugs.

An issue for teenagers

Many young people, particularly those who are marginalised and vulnerable, begin using alcohol and other drugs and become sexually active in their early teenage years. Work with this age group is vital. However some of the young people we consulted had left school, were in their late teenage years and most thought their support and education about sex, alcohol and other drugs had been inadequate.

Their stories and experiences highlight the importance of addressing these issues with young people as they leave home, enter further education, training, university and employment. Given the statistics on sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy and abortion for young people aged 18 to 30, this is imperative for future policy action.

Local contexts

While there is a need for a national policy thrust for this work, our research identified the impact of differing local contexts on young people's use of alcohol and other drugs. Effective coordination within children's services planning will effectively take account of local issues, through the use of health surveys, input from young people's services into local planning structures and young people's participation.

Professional competence

Many of the professionals we consulted as part of the project outlined a lack of confidence and skills in addressing these issues. They also lacked confidence in the mandate for developing the work. Although most recognised the importance of linking the issues, a lack of robust policy frameworks, skills and confidence inhibit the development of good practice.

Lack of resources

The Department of Health has funded a series of three resources addressing the issues. These have raised both the profile and interest in the work. However many professionals and young people talked about the lack of accessible leaflets and posters directly developed for young people addressing the links between sex, alcohol and other drugs.



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Recommendations for action

Given these key findings we recommend the following:

1. Dissemination

An effective dissemination strategy is developed across different agencies including: the Department of Health, the Department for Education and Skills (curriculum; children, young people and families; and behaviour divisions), the Home Office, the Youth Justice Board, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the National Healthy School Standard (NHSS), Tacade, Alcohol Concern/DrugScope, further education, Connexions, higher education, the National Healthy Care Standard (NHCS), the Sex Education Forum, the Drug Education Forum, Brook and the National Children's Bureau.

The strategy will include:

- a round table policy meeting for Government officials
- a high profile conference and seminar training programme for Teenage Pregnancy, Drug Action Team, Healthy Schools and Healthy Care partnerships
- dissemination of resources as a package to Teenage Pregnancy, Drug Action Team, Primary Care Trust, NHCS and NHSS coordinators.

2. Integration of the links into future policy

The learning is integrated into future policy developments with explicit and consistent integration of the links between sex, alcohol and other drugs into all children's policy. This will include the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy, the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and the National Drugs Strategy, and all guidance documents from the Department for Education and Skills, the Department of Health and the Home Office. All mainstream and targeted guidance must provide a mandate for local colleagues to

commission, plan and deliver work exploring the links between the issues.

When guidance and programmes are topic based we recommend it is always be located in the context of young people's 'joined up lives'.

3. Training and development

The learning should be integrated into all national and local training programmes including Connexions Personal Advisors, Personal, Social and Health Education certification programmes for teachers and nurses, Sexual Health Training Strategy as well as helpline advisors on Sexwise and Frank. A training module could be commissioned for local coordinators who support professionals including NHSS coordinators, Local Education Authority Advisors, NHCS coordinators and Primary Care Trusts.

4. Reporting

Local reporting to national offices on sexual health and teenage pregnancy, alcohol and other drugs work should include reporting on work that is being developed to explore the links.

5. Project development and research

We recommend that the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Skills commission a programme of project development and research including:

- a national development pilot project based on the New Zealand model of Peer Sexuality Support Students working on alcohol and other drugs
- a national development project that explores the particular issues for young people with learning disabilities in relation to sex, alcohol and other drugs
- a national development project that develops our understanding of how to ensure that children and young people learn about risk assessment and management effectively
- an international comparison of whether and how alcohol and other drugs are used as part of sexual negotiation and relationships in countries that have a more positive and open approach to sex and sexuality.

6. Resource and websites development

Resources, leaflets and campaigns must address the links between sex, alcohol and other drugs and we recommend:

- leaflets for young people exploring the issues are commissioned focusing on both younger people and those in their late teens and early 20s
- national campaigns such as Frank, Teenage Pregnancy and Sexual Health should develop materials that explore the links between sex, alcohol and other drugs
- when commissioning resources on sex and drug education, agencies are required to ensure the links are addressed.

Simon Blake
July 2004



Practitioners need to recognise that young people do not isolate and separate different issues; they are more 'joined up' for young people.

Sex, alcohol and other drugs
Exploring the links in young people's lives

Jeanie Lynch and Simon Blake

'I remember we would have sex education about once a term, and then the police would come in and talk to us about drugs.'

Young woman, age 18

For young people, sexual activity and the use of alcohol and other drugs are entwined. But the support and education we offer them often treats these issues in isolation.

Drawing heavily on the perspectives of young people, professionals and research, this resource brings into the spotlight the links between sexual activity and the use of alcohol and other drugs in young people's lives. It explores young people's opinions about the support they want, and the implications of this for policy and practice. Case studies and practical ideas are used throughout to illustrate how practitioners can address the links between sex, alcohol and other drugs with young people.

Sex, alcohol and other drugs provides a much needed foundation for developing policy and practice that is relevant to young people's lives and addresses the issues in a holistic fashion.



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