

Public Policy Briefing

This briefing is intended to give the reader the best current knowledge about young people's drug use at a glance.

Key points:

- Despite higher numbers of young people being offered illegal drugs the headline figures for those using all drugs are stable
- 12% of 11–15 year old pupils took cannabis in the last year (down from 13% in 2001–2003).
- 4% of 11–15 year olds have taken a Class A drug in the last year
- Among 11 and 12 year olds, misuse of volatile substances was more common than taking cannabis.
- While 42% of 11-15 year olds have never had a drink 22% have had a drink in the last week.

The Drug Education Forum is an umbrella group which promotes the provision of effective drug education for all children and young people in England.

Members: Adfam, Association of Chief Police Officers, Association of School and College Leaders, Association of Teachers and Lecturers, The Children's Society, Drug Abuse Resistance Education, Drug Education Practitioners Forum, DrugScope, Hope UK, Life Education Centres, Local Government Association, Mentor UK, National Association of Head Teachers, NASUWT, National Association of Youth and Community Education Officers, National Children's Bureau, National Health Education Group, NSCoPSE - the National PSE Association, NSPCC, National Union of Teachers, National Youth Agency, Professional Association of Teachers (PAT), and Tacade.

Young people, drugs and the role of drug education

Drugs remain a serious issue for young people in England, which is why the Drug Education Forum believes drug education must remain a priority for government, parents, schools, youth services and young people themselves. However, public debate often makes assumptions about children and young people's use of drugs. Our experience is that there are misconceptions which, if unchecked, damage public policy solutions.

It is encouraging that despite higher numbers of young people having access to illegal drugs, the headline figures for those using all drugs are stable. However, there is no room for complacency - it is vital we equip our young people with the knowledge and skills to make informed, independent and healthy decisions around any situation involving all drugs - legal or otherwise.

In education we recommend that the following definition of the word 'drug' be universally adopted: *a drug is a substance people take to change the way they feel, think or behave.* This term encompasses all prescribed and over-the-counter medicines, all legal drugs such as alcohol, tobacco, volatile (sniffable) substances, and all illegal drugs covered by the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971).

The Drug Education Forum believes that all children and young people are entitled to high quality drug education. This requires the Government to fund dedicated and specific drug education training across the children's workforce to equip teachers, youth workers, social workers, police officers and all others working with children and young people with the understanding, skills and information they need. Furthermore, we believe that drug education must be an integral part of a planned programme of Personal, Social and Health

Education within schools, and into the agreed local curriculum of statutory and voluntary youth services and all other children and young people's services.

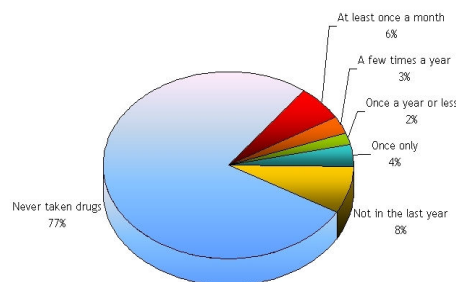
While it is important that illegal drugs are addressed within drug education, this should not be at the expense of other drugs, in particular alcohol, tobacco and volatile substances. In the last year young people themselves have highlighted the need for greater education on alcohol and tobacco, while more children and young people have died as a result of abusing volatile substances than all other drugs put together. Since early first use of alcohol and tobacco is one of the risks associated with problematic drug use in adult life it is essential that we listen to these messages.

The issue of young people's cannabis use has rightly had a lot of attention in recent times. Cannabis remains the most

widely used illegal drug by young people and the health risks associated with the drug are becoming clearer. The Drug Education Forum welcomes the Government's commitment to a national education campaign on the dangers to health associated with cannabis but it is vital that it follows and encourages what is known to be good practice by fully integrating it into wider programmes.

This means providing clear and accurate information about all drugs and their uses and the risks associated with them; ensuring the campaign is not just about one drug at the expense of more comprehensive drug education; that the campaign is connected to existing good practice; and should emphasise the importance of drug education being provided within the wider context of children and young people's personal, social and health development as a whole.

Frequency of Drug Taking (2005)



Key Facts about Children Young People and Drugs

Young people and cannabis

Cannabis is the most widely used illegal drug by young people. In 2005 the Department of Health survey of 11 to 15 year old school pupils indicated that 39% had ever been offered illegal drugs.

- 25% of this age group said they had been offered cannabis.

However, the latest figures suggest:

- 12% of 11–15 year old pupils took cannabis in the last year (down from 13% in 2001–

2003).

- There is almost no difference in the numbers of boys (12%) and girls (11%) who have taken cannabis in the last year.

The prevalence of taking cannabis increases with age. So:

- 1% of 11 year olds have taken cannabis in the last year, while 27% of 15 year olds have taken the drug in the same period.

“The slow decline in cannabis use since 1998 has been sustained following reclassification and there is no evidence at present of any short-term increase in consumption among young people since reclassification.”

Advisory Council for the Misuse of Drugs, 2005

Young people and other illegal drugs

More young people have access to illegal drugs. However, the numbers taking drugs are stable.

- Fewer than 1 in 5 11 - 15 year olds have had an illegal drug in the last year. Slightly up on the 2004 figure but lower than the three preceding years.
- 1 in 10 had taken an illegal drug in the last month
- Among 11 year olds, 6% had taken drugs in

the year, while 34% of 15 year olds had taken drugs in the last year.

- 1% of pupils aged 11 to 15 usually took drugs on most days, a further 2% took drugs at least once a week, and a further 3% took drugs once or twice a month.
- 4% had taken any Class A drug
- The prevalence of taking Class A drugs increased from less than 0.5% of 11 year olds to 8% of 15 year olds.

Young people and volatile substances

- In 2005, 7% of pupils reported having sniffed volatile substances such as glue, gas aerosols or solvents in the last year (up by 1% on 2004) and 4% reported sniffing poppers in the last year.
- Among 11 and 12 year olds, misuse of volatile substances was more common than taking cannabis
- 4% of 11 year olds had sniffed volatile substances in the last year and 1% had taken cannabis. Equivalent figures for 12 year olds were 6% and 3%.
- Of the 9 VSA deaths in under-18 year olds in 2003, 6 were associated with butane cigarette lighter refills, the sale of which to under-18s is prohibited by legislation.
- The numbers for 2002 were 24 deaths of which 15 were caused by butane.

Young people and alcohol

Young people tell us they want to have more alcohol education .

- In 2005, 42% of 11–15 year olds had **never** had a drink.
- 43% of boys and 40% of girls between 11 - 15 years old have **never** had a drink.
- In 2004 most (60%) alcohol was consumed in the home.
- 22% of all 11- 15 year olds have drunk alco-

hol in the last week

- The average consumption among pupils aged 11 to 15 who drank in the last seven days increased 10.4 units in 2000 to 10.5 units in 2005. However these figures are up from 5.3 units in 1990.
- The number of UK young people admitted to hospital because of drinking alcohol has risen by 11% since the mid-1990s.

Young people and smoking

Young people say that they want more education about tobacco.

- Fewer than 1 in 10 of all 11 - 15 year olds smoke regularly (at least one cigarette per week).
- Only 1% of 11 year olds smoke regularly
- 20% of 15 year olds smoke regularly
- Girls are more likely to smoke than boys (10% and 7% respectively).

- In 2004 43% of regular smokers who had smoked for more than a year wanted to give up.
- In 2004 89% felt their families would disapprove of them smoking.
- 52% of those who have tried to buy cigarettes from shops have been refused at least once.

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