

## Alcohol Education materials for secondary schools

**INTRODUCTION**

In 2000, the Teacher's Advisory Council on Alcohol and Drug Education (TACADE) recognised the need for up-to-date, research-based, innovative and effective alcohol education materials for secondary schools that would enable teachers to fulfil the National Curriculum requirements. With part funding from AERC, two educational packages were prepared:

- 1) Respect it! – a sequential series of lessons on alcohol for pupils aged 11 to 16. The intention of the pack was to provide complete and comprehensive alcohol education covering aspects of history, science, health and social issues.
- 2) Alcoshots – a photo-based teaching aid intended for use as visual supporting material for Respect it! or other educational packages, or, if used in its entirety, to fulfil the basic PSHE alcohol education requirements for secondary schools.

Effective alcohol education of any kind must engage pupils' interest. Inspiring too much curiosity about alcohol, however, can backfire. Sensationalising the substance and its potential can be counterproductive. Certainly some drug and alcohol programmes have been shown to increase dangerous experimental use among young people. Rather than attempt to teach the safe use of a dangerous substance, many schools simply advocate total abstinence. There are very few educational packages that guide teachers through this perilous terrain. The TACADE packages were developed in response to this need.

## EVALUATION

An independent research and evaluation company, Galahad SMS Ltd, assisted in the development and piloting of the TACADE materials to ensure that they achieved an appropriate balance of education and deterrence. The evaluation was carried out in three phases: 1) review of materials 2) piloting of materials in schools 3) re-writing.

First, a thorough review was conducted of the draft materials that had been prepared jointly by TACADE and a panel of educational consultants and teachers. Evaluators carefully considered all statements, exercises and facts in light of current research on effective alcohol education theory and techniques. Second, the packages were tested in six schools nationwide. The impact of the lessons was assessed by 'before and after' questionnaires that recorded information on pupils' knowledge, experience, attitude and expectations. Teachers were also asked to return questionnaires. Lesson observations, teacher interviews, and focus groups with pupils were conducted with two year groups. Finally, after the results were entered and analysed, the materials were re-written to eliminate misleading or confusing elements and to re-enforce the positive aspects that were found to be most effective during the trial. The drafts were then re-submitted to the advisory panel.

## FINDINGS

- Pupils in all year groups exhibited very little understanding of the basic facts about alcohol concerning the law, the short and long-term dangers of abuse, metabolism, addiction, first-aid, tolerance, etc.
- Nearly two-thirds of all pupils aged 12 to 15 drank alcohol at least once a month.
- Alcohol played a central role in the social lives of at least half of the pupils in the focus groups. For many, it was apparent that drinking behaviour defined status, character, image, and reputation. Drinking together served to maintain bonds between friends and clarify group membership. Giving drinks as gifts also maintained bonds of friendship, group hierarchies and identified those in the group who were felt to have achieved 'adult' status.
- Most pupils learn drinking behaviour (acceptable and unacceptable) largely from observing older siblings and older pupils.

- Binge-drinking was perceived by the majority to be the 'normal' way to drink.
- Most pupils were curious about alcohol's effects and eager to learn 'the facts.' Girls in particular were eager to learn about safety and health issues.
- Pupils wanted the freedom to discuss drink-related issues in the classroom, not just be 'preached at'.
- Pupils wanted classroom alcohol education to centre on realistic examples relevant to their lives.

#### CHANGES

In both TACADE packs there was felt to be an absence of clear, factual information about alcohol, and a lack of positive images and examples representing safe, sensible and non-problematic drinking. The materials were re-constructed to include these elements. As a result of questionnaire feedback, focus groups and class observations, many other changes – too numerous to mention here – were made in the course of the evaluation but the following example may serve as an illustration of the process that shaped the final product.

In one of the Respect it! lessons, the lesson plan called for a discussion of the definitions of use and misuse of alcohol. During class observation, it was apparent that many pupils lost interest once they realised that they fell on the wrong side of the definition. It was also clear from post-lesson discussions that being forced to re-label their style of drinking as 'misuse' had done nothing to encourage the young drinkers to reduce consumption or alter their drinking patterns. On the contrary, it led to a resignation that they were somewhat rebellious and deviant alcohol 'misusers' and would only try harder to live up to this image. It was felt that a more practical and understandable approach would be to illustrate a continuum between sober and intoxicated, safe and unsafe drinking – a technique that would allow pupils to make adjustments to their drinking behaviour based on rational and relevant criteria. This concept was reviewed by the panel of consultants and the lesson was re-drafted accordingly.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Achieving cultural or individual behavioural change via the classroom is a tall order. Drinking is largely a social phenomenon and, in a young person's world, is often associated with recreation, rebellion, maturity, sexuality, relationships and emotional problems. For education about alcohol to be effective, the reality of the young person's world must be acknowledged, valued and, to some extent, replicated in the classroom. While only a longitudinal study will confirm the effectiveness of any programme, this short-term evaluation has indicated that the research-based TACADE materials, if implemented by well-informed and experienced teachers, may exert a positive influence on the drinking behaviour and beliefs of secondary school pupils.

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available from the AERC Secretariat  
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