NE Choices:
Results of a multi-component drugs prevention programme for adolescents

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This paper reports on the final results of NE Choices, a drugs prevention programme based in the north-east of England. The programme combined drama, youth work, classroom activities, media and information, work with parents and community activities. NE Choices was targeted at young people as they progressed through school between the ages of 13 and 16. There were three intervention phases:

- **Year Nine intervention** – delivered in 1996/97 to a target group aged 13–14
- **Year Ten intervention** – delivered in 1997/98 to a target group aged 14–15
- **Year Eleven intervention** – delivered in 1998/99 to a target group aged 15–16

DPAS Paper and Briefing No. 4 reported on the implementation of the project with Year 9 pupils and the immediate response. This briefing describes the implementation of the Year 10 and 11 interventions and summarises the outcome findings of the entire programme.

**THE STUDY AT A GLANCE**

Ten schools provided data on outcome indicators. Six of these received the intervention and four were control schools. The behavioural outcomes sought by NE Choices for young people were:

- to reduce the prevalence of drug use
- to delay the age of onset of drug use
- to reduce the frequency of drug use among those who use drugs
- to reduce mixing of drugs and mixing of drugs and alcohol by those who use drugs

A longitudinal survey examined the intentions and behaviour of young people at baseline and each year for three years to determine if the behavioural outcomes were met. There was no evidence of an impact of the programme on behaviour according to the above indicators, although a small number of pupils in the intervention schools exhibited a de-escalation of drug use. Nevertheless, young people overwhelmingly rated NE Choices as a credible and engaging intervention. NE Choices also produced high-quality information products for teachers, parents and pupils.
THE YEAR TEN INTERVENTION

The Year Ten intervention comprised:

- **Out of school drama workshop.** During an all-day out-of-school drama workshop, pupils embarked on an interactive quest to investigate the drugs-related disappearance of a fictional character. The exercise was designed to encourage them to reflect on their own choices and beliefs about drugs. Attendance was very high (94%). Qualitative research suggested that the actors were regarded as credible and reliable sources of information on drugs, and that the pupils had been effectively engaged and stimulated to think about the consequences of drugs and their own choices.

- **Teacher training and manual.** A one-day teacher-training course and accompanying manual were delivered to all teachers in intervention schools responsible for Year Ten tutoring, guidance and PSHE. The teacher training course and manual appeared to have increased teachers’ knowledge and confidence regarding their ability to address drugs issues in the classroom.

- **Classroom follow-up.** Schools were briefed to deliver four classroom sessions to follow-up the drama session. In practice, schools delivered varying amounts of follow-up, achieving an average of one to two sessions, or two hours. The proportion of pupils recalling any classroom follow-up ranged from 8% to 69%.

- **Information products.** Multi-media elements were developed to support the drama workshop: interactive computer software and video material; Fact files for pupils, families and Governors, and promotional materials.

- **Media activity.** A press launch was held in February 1998, and followed-up by weekly or fortnightly releases relating to aspects of NE Choices. The resulting local media coverage was greater and more sustained than in Year Nine. Media activity was continued in Year Eleven.

THE YEAR ELEVEN INTERVENTION

The third year of the programme in Year Eleven comprised:

- **Peer-led youth work projects.** A six-month youth work project was conducted in each intervention school in which pupils devised a piece of drugs education work and delivered it to their peers. Forty-four Year Eleven pupils developed the projects over the six months. In total, around 340 Year Eleven pupils were involved, either as project participants or recipients, plus around 700 younger pupils. Young people had a high recall of the projects, and perceived them as novel, engaging and more credible than standard classroom approaches to drugs education.

- **Video Box.** The project work was complemented by the Video Box, a walk-in interactive installation featuring a compilation of project work from the intervention schools. It was exhibited in five intervention schools over a five-week period, where 785 Year Eleven pupils visited it.

- **Intensive residential intervention with ‘high risk’ youth.** A week-long course for young people identified as ‘high-risk’ was designed and
implemented by a local charity. The course comprised a mixture of outdoor and indoor activities and featured a session on drugs and their effects that was facilitated by a former drug addict. Although funding was provided for up to 36 young people, the schools identified just 13 young people, of whom only eight attended the course.

- **Parents’ programme.** This element included drama-based drugs awareness sessions and support groups. Despite low audience numbers (ranging from two to twenty parents within the three sessions observed) the intended aims of the workshop appeared to have been largely met. Parents described gaining more understanding of the factors that lead young people to experiment with drugs, and an appreciation of some productive ways of discussing drugs with their children.

**OUTCOME FINDINGS**

The baseline and three follow-up surveys were used to evaluate whether NE Choices achieved its aims of reducing both drug use prevalence and associated harm. Difficulty in matching responses between survey stages meant that just over half (54% or 1,036 pupils) of the original sample could be matched to the final survey four years on. The full report therefore presents two sets of results: cross-sectional data from respondents at successive survey stages, and longitudinal data from pupils who could be matched between the baseline and the final survey. Some specific points are as follows:

- Nearly half the young people (47%) had been in drug offer situations at baseline, rising over the next two years to 71%. They had access to a range of drugs, but in particular, cannabis, with as many as two-thirds having been offered cannabis or able to obtain it.

- Approximately a third had experimented with a drug at the baseline survey, peaking at half of respondents two years later. Cannabis was the main drug to have been tried, followed by solvents. Smaller numbers had tried magic mushrooms, amphetamines, nitrites, LSD, ecstasy, cocaine and heroin.

- A minority (peaking at a fifth) of those who experimented with drugs had taken more than one drug at the same time. Many more – nearly a half of experimenters – had taken drugs in combination with alcohol.

- There was no evidence that NE Choices had made an impact on drug-using prevalence or harm reduction (an apparent drop in drug taking by the third follow-up survey can be explained by sample attrition and a change to conducting the survey by post). However, a very small proportion (2%) reduced their drug taking by changing from harder drugs to cannabis, solvents or nitrites or to non-use. This effect was greatest among pupils at schools which received the full NE Choices intervention, with four percent doing so, compared to one percent at partial intervention and control schools. While the numbers are very small, the data suggests that NE Choices may have encouraged these respondents to de-escalate their drug use.
The drama and youth work used by NE Choices proved to be highly engaging channels through which to deliver drugs education interventions to young people. NE Choices also had a positive response from its secondary targets. Parents reported increased knowledge about drugs, and a greater appreciation of how to discuss drugs with their children. Teachers and youth workers gained in drugs knowledge and drugs education skills through their participation.

The report discusses reasons why, given its success in engaging the target group, the programme appeared to have little or no impact on drug use, and suggests good practice lessons for future programmes and research. Interventions should:

- be of sufficient length and intensity to stand a chance of impacting on behaviour;
- target a younger age group, beginning at age 11 (Year Seven);
- last for a minimum of three years;
- combine different elements and use a range of settings and channels for delivery, including drama which appears to be a particularly engaging medium for young people;
- thoroughly integrate policy and publicity elements with the core components;
- address the needs of vulnerable young people, who may be disaffected with the formal education system; and
- be evaluated on behavioural outcome measures using clusters of schools, as opposed to limiting analysis to data on individual pupils.

Related reports include:


The full NE Choices report, this briefing, and other DPAS and Drugs Prevention Initiative (DPI) publications are available on the DPAS website at:

http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/dpas/dpas.htm together with additional information about DPAS.

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