

# Learning from life skills programmes in drug education

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This briefing paper is **part of a series** produced by the Drug Education Forum, for schools and others involved in drug education or informal drug prevention.

## The Drug Education Forum

The Drug Education Forum was funded by the Department of Education between 1995 and 2012 to inform and improve drug education in England. The DEF has been a reference hub of best policy and practice, analysing complex data and providing expert analysis and commentary for smaller and non-specialist organisations, as well as national members.

The DEF contributed extensively to government consultations, and was involved in key developments in drug education. As a free expert resource for practitioners nationwide, it also had significant impact at local level.

This briefing paper is one in a series of six published in March 2012; author Claire James. The series comprises:

- The principles of good drug education
- Principles for supporting school drug education
- Beyond the lesson plan: Drug prevention and early intervention
- Engaging parents in drug education
- Learning from life skills programmes in drug education
- Legal highs

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Life skills education is an interactive process of teaching and learning, which is being adopted around the world as a means to empower young people in challenging situations and is the recommended approach to children and young people's personal, social and health development within formal and informal education settings.<sup>1</sup> In particular, life skills are a group of psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner.<sup>2</sup>

Life skills education is synonymous with good PSHE Education, which is an English term. As well as contributing to the development of the child and young person, it has been shown to increase the likelihood of their achieving their academic potential.

In addition, specific programmes have been developed that aim to develop children and young people's life skills. Many of these have been evaluated in some way, but comprehensive evaluation in randomised controlled trials (RCTs) is rarer. An RCT is a large scale study that compares the outcomes for young people receiving a specific programme with the outcomes for those who don't. Importantly, in these trials, schools or classes are assigned at random to the intervention and control groups, so the results are not biased by other characteristics of schools that choose to take part.



This paper focuses on two similar programmes, Life Skills Training and Unplugged, which have shown to be effective in RCTs at reducing drug use among young people. Many of the elements described below are shared with other programmes, but these two were chosen because of their strong evidence base.

Life Skills Training has been developed over three decades in the United States and is now widely used there. There are several programmes available. The elementary school and middle school programmes each take place over three years and are approximately equivalent to Key Stages 2 and 3 in the English and Welsh system. Shorter programmes are also available for older students. As yet, Life Skills Training has not been licensed for use in the UK.

### Life Skills Training: the evidence

Life Skills Training has been extensively evaluated in a series of studies. In a trial of the elementary school programme (KS2), children who had taken part were almost two thirds less likely to have smoked in the past year (61%) and a quarter less likely to have drunk alcohol.<sup>3</sup> Age of initiation is significantly related to later adverse outcomes for both smoking and drinking.

Effects of the programme can last several years. Three years after finishing the middle school programme (KS3), young people's monthly smoking was reduced by 18-21% and pack-a-day smoking by 17-25%. Drunkenness was reduced 15-18%. The reduction was greater in a subgroup who received 60% or more of the full programme.<sup>4</sup>

Unplugged is a programme for students aged 12-14. It was developed by the European Commission and evaluated in seven European countries during 2004/05. Unplugged has also not yet been trialled in the UK, but an English translation of the materials is freely available online (see Resources section).

### Unplugged: the evidence

The EU-Dap study of the Unplugged programme was conducted simultaneously across seven European countries: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain and Sweden, covering 143 schools.

Three months after completing the programme, the young people who had taken part in the programme were around 30% less likely to smoke daily compared to the control group, they were 28% less likely to have been drunk in the past month, and there was a 31% reduction in frequent drunkenness.<sup>5</sup> Fifteen months after programme completion, there were still significant differences from the control group: around 20% fewer said they had been drunk in the past month; 38% fewer were drunk frequently; and 26% fewer used cannabis frequently.<sup>6</sup>

## Life skills in relation to drug use

We now have a good idea of the factors that may predispose young people to use drugs (including alcohol and cigarettes) earlier and in more harmful ways or make such use less likely.

- **Environment.** This includes poverty and whether there is a local culture of drug use or drug-using role models among peers and adults.
- **Family.** Good relationships with parents who set boundaries and are involved in young people's lives protect against drug misuse.
- **Beliefs about drugs.** Are they seen as 'adult', conferring status, dangerous, against religious values, or normal?
- **Personality.** Those who are stressed or depressed, impulsive, or inclined to risk-taking are more likely to develop harmful drug use.
- **Education.** Good relationships with teachers, motivation to do well and actual school performance are all protective factors.

These relate to the reasons why young people start using drugs, which might be out of curiosity or boredom, to join in with friends, to assert independence from 'adult' values or to gain status. Beyond experimentation, young people may use drugs to relax, bond with friends, boost confidence, or deal with stress or negative emotions. These different motivations affect the chance of developing harmful patterns of use.

From this it can be seen that knowledge about the effects of drugs is at best a minor factor in young people's decision-making. Nor will advice on resisting peer pressure be a failsafe route to drug avoidance. Programmes that cover a broad range of life skills can help young people in different ways depending on their differing needs and risk factors, for example, being more confident in social situations without relying on alcohol; considering decisions more carefully; assertiveness to avoid getting drawn into situations they are uncomfortable with; improving relationships with parents through better communication; or focusing on long-term goals and aspirations while avoiding behaviour that may compromise these ambitions.

Set out below are some of the main skills developed by programmes such as Unplugged and Life Skills Training. The three categories are those defined by the WHO: the first two focus on social influences, while the third deals with internal values, motivation and coping skills. Although the programmes are structured so that they usually focus on one particular skill or knowledge area in each lesson, any activity will usually draw on multiple skills. Skills will sometimes be applied to more general situations, but a significant proportion of the course content relates to drugs, and reinforces the knowledge element of the programmes.



## Decision-making and critical thinking skills

In general, critical thinking questions assumptions. It involves considering about the reliability of different sources of information. Regarding drugs, young people are encouraged to think about the accuracy of media portrayals of alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs; and reconsider their own assumptions about the norms of behaviour amongst their peers.

The media present aspirational images of drinking: a marker of masculine identity, cementing male friendships; for women it is seen to be about glamour and celebrity. Alongside this, negative stories about young people's drinking or the dangers of drugs may not glamorise this behaviour, but can perpetuate myths. Understanding the way the media works in general, and the power of advertising in particular, can help young people see beyond the concept of drug use as a lifestyle statement.

Closer to home, young people tend to overestimate the amount of drug use among their peers and also the extent to which others see this as acceptable. This can encourage drug use and reinforce the idea that certain behaviours are 'normal' and necessary to fit in. A key aim of life skills programmes is to correct these misperceptions. Unplugged, for example, asks students to estimate the proportion of 15-18 year olds using different drugs (importantly this is an older age group, one that the younger adolescents taking part in the programme will often want to emulate). They are then given the correct figures to discuss.

More information about social norms is available from the Social Norms Guidebook, listed in the Resources section of this paper, in particular using a school questionnaire to establish the extent of actual drug use among peers and so challenge any misconceptions.

Decision-making involves identifying different solutions to problems through creative thinking and evaluating the possible consequences of these solutions. Students can work together to explore solutions to case studies that are relevant to their own lives.

## Communication and interpersonal skills

The need for belonging is part of our physiological wellbeing and belonging helps us feel safe. Human beings want and need to feel part of a group and will adapt to the group's social norms. Peer influence and social conformity can have both positive and negative effects. These programmes aim to help young people build the social skills, such as effective communication, assertiveness, empathy and active listening, that can help make and keep positive relationships, while feeling confident about asserting their own values and decisions. Enabling open communication about issues associated with drug use and improving negotiation skills also has the potential to improve relationships with parents.

Direct peer pressure has sometimes been overestimated as a route to drug use – the 'just say no' approach. However, for people of all ages, the ability to be assertive but not confrontational is a valuable life skill. It can be useful in situations involving drugs and alcohol, either to be able to 'say no' altogether, or to manage use and stay within self-defined limits of what is safe and responsible. Young people are encouraged to think about how much one's behaviour can be modified by being in a group and develop respect for each other's individual differences as well as characteristics shared within a group.

### Coping and self-management skills

One protective factor against drug misuse is the extent to which young people believe that they can make a difference in the world and effect change. This helps give them the motivation to work towards long-term goals, for example achievement in education or sport. Their experiences in school so far will have affected whether they have this sense of control over their environment and outcomes. Life skills programmes can help young people learn how to set appropriate goals in their lives and break these down into short-term objectives to make them achievable, increasing their sense of agency in their lives.

Drugs may be used as a coping mechanism to deal with stress and negative emotions. These programmes aim to increase young people's awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses. Students learn about healthy coping strategies for dealing with difficult situations, and emotions like anxiety and anger.

### Effective learning in life skills programmes

#### Interactive learning

Evidence suggests that didactic teaching is much less effective generally in drug education than interactive techniques.<sup>7</sup> In particular, life skills cannot be learned just by reading a book. Life skills programmes use a range of techniques such as group discussion, role play, and putting skills into practice. This also enables information about drugs to be located in a realistic context. Establishing good two-way communication between teacher and students can help teachers ensure that lessons are responsive to their young people's particular needs.

The approach of life skills programmes fits comfortably within the key principles for teaching PSHE education (as identified by the PSHE Association). These include: "take a positive approach that does not attempt to induce shock or guilt"; "offer a wide variety of teaching and learning styles, with an emphasis on interactive learning and the teacher as facilitator"; "provide information which is realistic and relevant and which reinforces positive social norms"; "encourage young people to reflect on their learning". The full list is available in the Resources section of this paper.



### Learning as a long-term process

The Unplugged programme takes place over 12 lessons. The Life Skills Training elementary programme (KS2) has 24 lessons over three years, while the middle school programme (KS3) has 21 essential lessons and nine optional ones over three years. This contrasts with the all-too-common practice in UK schools of teaching drug education in one-off ‘drop-down’ days. An important element of all lessons is the reflection sessions at the end, while homework can both build learning and be a means of involving parents in drug education.

### Teachers trained and supported

Although PSHE education is most effectively delivered by teachers who are well-qualified in the subject, in a significant proportion of schools all or the majority of PSHE is taught by non-specialists.<sup>8</sup> In those life skills programmes which have been evaluated and have shown a significant impact, thorough initial training and ongoing provision of support to teachers are considered an essential to successful programme delivery. Government advises schools to include specific continuing professional development opportunities for drug education within their drugs policy.<sup>9</sup>

### Adapting Unplugged: In:tuition

Drinkaware have developed a life skills programme for ages 9-14 aiming to delay the age of first drink (currently around 13). They used Unplugged as a framework, with lessons on the same themes, for example self-esteem, identity, social norms, motivation and goals, peer pressure and coping strategies: but adapted the programme to include a primary school element. Its theme is alcohol, but its focus is wider, addressing a range of relevant personal needs in an age sensitive way. The activities were also changed significantly, with a focus on innovative digital tools to engage young people. The In:tuition programme is currently being piloted in 40 schools across the UK.

## Resources

- English translations of the Unplugged teacher and student materials can be downloaded from [www.eudap.net](http://www.eudap.net)
- [www.lifeskillstraining.com](http://www.lifeskillstraining.com) has general information about Life Skills Training, although the materials are only available under licence.
- In:tuition materials are available from [www.intuitionkit.com](http://www.intuitionkit.com)
- PSHE Association Ten principles of PSHE education <http://bit.ly/x6ZLml>
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