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Disengaged from school, engaged with drugs and alcohol? Young people at risk

Key Messages

- Disengagement from school, including truancy and exclusion, is linked to drug and alcohol use and other risky health behaviours.
- Absence from school damages educational achievement, and young people with few or no qualifications are at high risk of becoming NEET.
- Disengagement can start at a young age, particularly among children from poorer backgrounds and those struggling with basic skills.
- Interventions that develop young people's social and emotional capabilities can improve academic achievement and protect against risky behaviour.
- Early intervention in response to drug and alcohol incidents can reduce permanent exclusions and the risk of longer-term misuse.

Mentor: Thinking Prevention

Mentor works to identify and promote the best means of protecting young people from alcohol and drug harms. These clearly cannot be separated from other facets of young people's physical, social and emotional wellbeing. This briefing paper is one of a series of five which explore public health issues including underage conception, smoking, crime and anti-social behaviour, alcohol harms and disengagement from school. We can't afford to wait until adulthood to tackle these problems, so it is vital to understand prevention approaches that can be effective with children and young people

The papers are available from www.mentoruk.org.uk/publichealth

Alcohol, drugs and disengagement

The relationship between disengagement from learning and getting involved in risky behaviour is complex. Risk factors such as living in poverty, family difficulties and bullying can lead to disengagement, which in turn increases the likelihood of disruptive behaviour, and drug and alcohol misuse. There are clear links between school absence and smoking, drinking and drug use. In the national survey of 11-15 year olds, after controlling for other factors:¹

- Pupils who had truanted from school in the past year were around three times more likely to smoke regularly, over twice as likely to have drunk alcohol in the past week and were 1.85 times as likely to have taken drugs in the past year.
- Pupils who had been excluded from school in the last year were almost three times as likely to smoke regularly and over three times as likely to have taken drugs in the past year.

About Mentor

Mentor is the UK's leading charity dedicated to protecting young people from drug and alcohol harms. We review research from around

the world, test promising approaches and work to translate best policy and practice into evidence based national and local services.



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Overall, 12% of pupils who said that they had ever truanted or been excluded said that they usually take drugs once a month, compared with 1% of pupils who have never truanted or been excluded.¹ Similarly, a study in Edinburgh found a strong link between truancy and smoking, alcohol use, drug use and having sold drugs.²

There may be a causal link in that young people not at school have more unsupervised time to drink and smoke, but substance use may also be a form of rejection of the school's values. It may emerge before truancy becomes a problem. In a study which followed young people from 14 to 16 it was found that drinking alcohol, especially frequently, was a strong predictor of an increase in truancy the following year. Truancy also predicted taking up drinking among young people who had not previously drunk alcohol, but the relationship was not as strong.³

Even for those who do not physically withdraw from school, school disengagement can be a risk factor for drug and alcohol use. For example, a study in the North West of England found that 11-14 year olds who did not like being at school were twice as likely to have consumed alcohol as those who were happy at school.⁴

The school ethos affects children and young people's confidence and sense of 'belonging' within school. Schools can also give children and young people 'someone to turn to' when in trouble. If the school environment is perceived by students to be unsafe, drug use may be seen as one means to establish a 'tough' reputation, to gain respect from peers and to avoid isolation by bonding with a protective friendship group. However, behaviours engaged in to appear tough can further alienate these students from teachers and make other students feel less safe in school, creating a vicious circle.

For other students, drug use can be an escape from stress about exams, bullying or family problems. Having been bullied has been identified as a significant risk factor for drinking alcohol,³ while bullying is the main cause of truancy for some young people.⁵

What is 'disengagement'?

Disengagement from school may start with one or more problems such as a poor relationship with one or more teachers, academic problems, a lack of close friends at school, bullying or a peer group who reject the school's values or authority. The young person and the school's reaction to these seeds of disengagement may exacerbate problems rather than solve them. For example, a young person struggling with academic work, and not getting support may give up trying, so falling further behind. Frustration may lead to bad behaviour, worsening relationships with teachers.

Status may be sought elsewhere by taking up risky behaviours outside school such as smoking, drinking and drug use, along with an 'anti-learning' culture. This can directly affect schoolwork, and also affects teachers and other adults' views of a young person's potential.

When children and young people start skipping school this also exacerbates problems. Missing lessons affects pupils' ability to catch up. Persistent and repeated absence can also affect friendships, making young people isolated. Teachers identify a vicious circle where children and young people return to school and feel excluded both from work and socially, triggering further absence.⁶ Some cope with these feelings by being disruptive when they return to class, further irritating and alienating teachers and classmates. Children with poor attendance are unlikely to succeed academically, and persistent absentees are seven times more likely to be recorded as NEET at the age of 16 than other young people.⁷

Exclusion and truancy: who is at risk?

Children from poorer backgrounds are at greater risk of disengagement. They are more likely to struggle academically from the start of primary school onwards. They may see the school's values as irrelevant to their day to day lives. Parents may lack the practical knowledge that enables them to support their children, for example with homework and later with career advice, and may find it more difficult to find solutions to any problems at school.

Disengagement manifesting in bad behaviour within school can ultimately result in removal through fixed-term or permanent exclusion. In 2010/11 174,280 pupils in England were given a total of 324,110 fixed-term exclusions. There were also 5,080 permanent exclusions.⁸ The official statistics also show that:

- Boys are around three times more likely to be excluded than girls.
- Pupils with statements of special educational needs (SEN) are around nine times more likely to be permanently excluded than those pupils with no SEN.
- Children who are eligible for free school meals are around three times more likely to receive a fixed period exclusion and nearly four times as likely to be permanently excluded.

Children and young people may also choose to absent themselves from school, and this can start as early as primary school. It is commonly perceived that children are only absent from primary school with parental collusion,⁹ and it is clear that some parents condone children staying off school. However, research indicates that children themselves 'vote with their feet'. For example, in one survey 27% of primary school children said they had truanted without their parents knowing and most of these believed their parents would be angry to discover they had truanted.¹⁰

Similarly, in the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime, 18% of children reported ever truanting during primary education.² This rose steadily, and by the third year of secondary education, 44% had missed at least part of the

school day in the previous year. The proportion described as 'persistent' (defined here as 10 episodes of skipping or skiving school) rose from 9% of truants in the primary years to 24% of truants by the third year of secondary school.

The majority of truants in this study reported that they have not been in trouble for skipping school. Even with persistent truants a third in the first and second year of secondary school said that they had not been caught or been in trouble for truancy.

Becoming NEET

Leaving school at the age of 16 with few or no qualifications makes it much more likely that a young person will find themselves not in education, employment or training. A 2008 government statement notes that of those young people who failed to gain any GCSE passes, 39% were recorded as being NEET subsequently, compared to only 2% of those who attained five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C.⁷

Issues which affected young people's school engagement and achievement may continue to be a barrier to training or employment, compounding poor qualifications. The risk factors associated with being NEET at age 16-18 include:

- Having parents who are poor and unemployed;
- Living in a deprived neighbourhood;
- Being in care or having been in care;
- Becoming a parent in their mid-teenage years;
- Having a disability, special educational need or learning disability;
- Being a young carer;
- Being homeless;
- Having a mental illness;
- Misusing drugs or alcohol;
- Being involved in offending.

Low aspirations have frequently been identified as a problem, but recent research shows young people who are NEET having similar aspirations to others.¹¹ Problems occur when aspirations are not matched by educational achievement, when

young people do not recognise the link between schoolwork and realising their aspirations until it is too late; when young people and parents are not aware of possibilities or the routes that need to be taken to secure certain occupations; and when personal problems, such as those listed above limit educational achievement and prevent young people from accessing career opportunities. These problems are exacerbated in areas of high youth unemployment.

Being NEET

In the first quarter of 2012, one in ten 16 to 18 year olds in England (9.8%) were officially NEET (not in education, employment or training).^{*} This represents around 6% of 16 year olds, 9% of 17 year olds and 14% of 18 year olds. Around half of these young people would be expected to still be NEET a year later.¹² This is the most worrying statistic, since longer term periods of being out of education and employment can have a lifelong impact.

Young people who are NEET are a diverse category. Analysis from the Youth Cohort Study of young people who were NEET¹³ categorised them into three groups:

'Open to learning' (two-fifths): young people who are generally positive about education, many having achieved Level 2 qualifications (GCSEs grades A*-C or NVQ level 2). They may have tried to pursue one option, decided it was wrong for them and dropped out, but would be keen to take up a more suitable opportunity.

'Undecided' (one-fifth): young people, generally with negative attitudes to school, unable to make up their minds about what they want to do, or are unable to access the type of provision they want in the area where they live. They often appear to lack the resilience or skills to access suitable opportunities. After a year, 60% of this group were still NEET.

'Sustained' (two-fifths): young people who tend to come from deprived backgrounds, often having failed to achieve Level 1 qualifications (GCSEs grades D-G or level 1 NVQ) and with no recent

history of employment. Some 60% were still NEET after a year. In addition to a lack of qualifications, projects trying to re-engage sustained NEETs cited socio-emotional difficulties as being significant for some in this group, including having low confidence or self esteem; anger management issues; poor motivation or timekeeping; and difficulty dealing with those in positions of authority.

Those who have escaped NEET status a year later tend to be from better socio-economic backgrounds. However, young people's GCSE results are an even more significant predictor of moving into employment or back to education, underlining the importance of academic achievement.¹²

A common pattern is one of 'churn' in and out of education and employment. A significant group of young people – between a third and a half of the cohort – are struggling to find appropriate courses and appropriate jobs which will give them a secure entry into the labour market, with prospects of continued progression.¹⁴

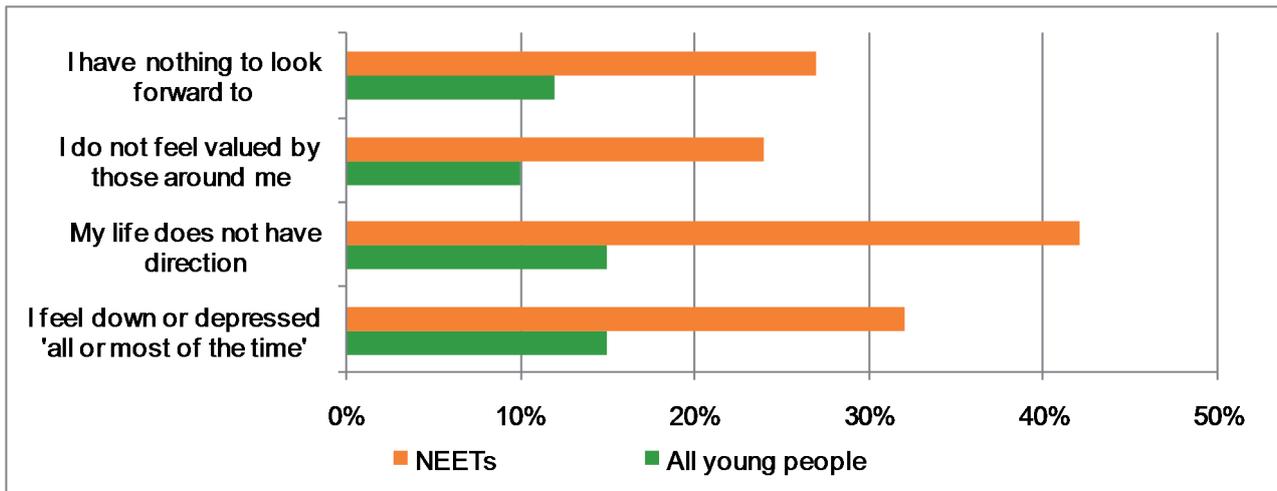
Wellbeing and mental health

A survey in 2010 found that almost a third of young people who were NEET said they felt down or depressed 'all or most of the time' compared to 15% of all young people.¹⁵ As shown in the graph on the following page, these young people were also less likely to feel valued by those around them.

One study found that of those young people who were NEET for at least six months age 16-17, for a third (33%) their substance use might cause concern (defined as drinking alcohol on most days, and/or being regular smokers (at least six cigarettes a week) as well as having tried cannabis). This compares to 15% of all young people. In the survey for the Princes Trust cited above, 11% of 16-25 year olds who were or had been unemployed said that they had turned to drugs and alcohol as a direct result of unemployment.

^{*} Age refers to academic age (age on 31 August), so '16 year olds' actually refers to 16 and 17 year olds in the same school year.

Results of wellbeing survey of young people who are NEET ¹⁵



Long-term impacts

Youth unemployment has been linked both to later periods of unemployment and to reduced future wages, after taking other characteristics into account.¹⁶ As the Marmot Review sets out clearly, health outcomes are intimately linked with socio-economic status.¹⁷ Unemployment contributes to ill health – through poverty, direct mental health impacts, and impacts on health behaviours such as increased smoking and alcohol consumption. Poor health also increases the likelihood of unemployment, and the two can become mutually reinforcing. Insecure, low status and stressful employment can also have a negative health impact.¹⁷

Skills development as a protective factor

Children falling behind in the core skills of language, literacy and numeracy are more likely to become disillusioned with school. The evidence base is growing for interventions which have the greatest impact on developing these skills.²⁰

There is also increasing evidence of the importance of social and emotional capabilities ('soft skills'). Young people's achievements are not just related to their academic abilities. 'Soft skills' such as self-discipline, communication, and managing feelings, have been associated with academic performance²¹ as well as avoiding risky behaviour. While these skills start to be developed in very early childhood, they are still malleable in adolescence. Schools, youth services and other extra-curricular activities or mentoring can help develop these, improving self-confidence and academic achievement.²⁰

The Good Behaviour Game

Some of the strongest evidence that working with children in the early years of school can have a long-term impact comes from studies of the Good Behaviour Game. This is a way of improving young children's behaviour during lessons and helping disruptive children settle into school. Children are divided into teams which during short periods of the day are given the chance to earn prizes and praise by keeping to simple rules for good behaviour.

A long-term trial in Baltimore showed dramatic impacts, particularly among initially disruptive boys. At age 19/20 participants showed 50% lower rates of lifetime illicit drug abuse/dependence, were 59% less likely to smoke 10 or more cigarettes per day, and had a 35% lower rate of lifetime alcohol abuse/dependence. They were 21% more likely to have completed their secondary education and 62% more likely to be attending university. A feasibility study in the UK with six primary schools in Oxfordshire has so far shown promising results with regard to behavioural impact.¹⁹

Early intervention

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to begin primary school with lower personal, social and emotional development and communication, language and literacy skills than their peers. They are also at significantly increased risk of developing conduct disorders. All these factors increase the risk for later disengagement from education and underachievement. This indicates that prevention should be weighted towards early years services: high quality childcare and preschool, and better early identification of problems and support for children and families.

Primary schools have been urged to do more to identify and address school absence,¹⁸ but poor attendance is often a sign that there are some more serious issues going on in the child's home. Schools need early support from social services to avoid costly interventions later.

Effective help can also be provided once children start school, to enable them to settle in and to deal with problems that arise, whether socio-emotional or learning. A clear example of this is the Good Behaviour Game (see box) which led to significant reductions in future school drop-out and drug misuse, particularly among the most disruptive boys.

School ethos and policies

Schools vary in the extent to which they provide a safe, inclusive environment, give pupils a sense of agency and recognise achievements. Policies which promote young people's attachment to school help protect against risky behaviours. These would include effective anti-bullying policies (including homophobic bullying and sexual harassment); participation and pupil voice; positive relationships with teachers and other adults; and working with parents and the wider community to support children and young people.

While it is important that schools have exclusion as a sanction of last resort, pupils excluded from school are at increased risk of drug and alcohol misuse. A review of school exclusions highlighted a lack of transparency in managing exclusions, with some schools failing to comply with their legal obligations in respect of official exclusions, carrying out unofficial illegal exclusions, or otherwise failing to provide an acceptable level of pastoral care and education.²² This clearly puts pupils at higher risk of drug and alcohol harms.

Enabling schools to access external support for pupils in response to drug and alcohol incidents or concerns can play a key role in reducing both permanent exclusions and long-term harm (see box).

Nottingham DrugAware

A focus on prevention and early intervention in Nottingham schools resulted in permanent exclusions for drug and alcohol incidents in participating schools being halved over two years, with a 400% increase in referrals into structured drug treatment from educational settings.²³

Schools and other services use Ngage, an interactive tool to enable young people to talk about the issues they are facing and to assess their needs. Support is delivered either within school through a mentor, teaching assistant or school nurse or by referral to an external service. Earlier referrals result in a shorter treatment time needed and a very low rate of return to treatment compared with the standard model of intervention at a later stage.

Schools are supported to meet the DrugAware standard. This covers policy development; staff training; a drug education curriculum based on assessment of children's needs; involvement of parents and carers; and raising awareness by celebrating schools' successes.

Resources

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- Chan, G., Foxcroft, D., Coombes, L. and Allen, D. (2012) [Improving child behaviour management: An evaluation of the Good Behaviour Game in UK primary schools](#). Oxford Brookes University and Oxfordshire County Council
- www.nottinghamdrugaware.co.uk

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