

Can six lessons over 2 years in school on alcohol really affect the age that teenagers start drinking?

The Alcohol Education Trust has successfully proved that talking to children early enough in an engaging way, without preaching about alcohol, in just a few lessons over 2 years taught by the schools non-specialist teachers, can significantly delay the age kids decide to start drinking.

The National Foundation for Education Research, leading evaluators who conduct the annual Smoking, drinking and drug use of young people report, followed the effect of the Alcohol Education Trust's 'Talk about Alcohol' programme among school children in England over 4 years (2011 – 2015).

At the outset 4,500 pupils in 34 schools were recruited – 16 schools who delivered the lessons and 17 schools who didn't were carefully matched for Ofsted ranking, number of free school meals and ethnic mix, for example.

By the end of Year 9 when the kids were on average aged 14, 4,000 children in 30 schools completed detailed questionnaires on their attitudes and behaviour around alcohol. Finally 18 schools and 2,000 of the original pupils responded in detail about how much, when, where and if they were drinking alcohol when aged 15/16 (Year 11), two years after the Talk about Alcohol lessons were delivered.

Already at age 12/13, over 40% of kids in all the schools had had a whole alcoholic drink, usually on a special occasion with family. The number who chose to take up drinking rose over the subsequent years to 79% of the teenagers in their GCSE year in schools who hadn't had the programme, versus just 64% of teenagers who'd had 6 lessons on alcohol two years earlier.

Interestingly, knowledge about alcohol and its effects was similar among all the teenagers, meaning this didn't affect whether they chose to drink or not. Across all students in the sample at age 15-16, 29% of the intervention group and 37% of the comparison group drank frequently.

- **Over 40% of all the 4,400 children surveyed at outset had already had a whole drink, usually at home by age 12 or 13 (year 8).**
- **36% of these children who were then taught the AET programme, chose not to drink at 15/16 years old, compared to only 21% who had not been exposed to the programme.**
- **Teens are more likely to drink if they have more siblings, have a poor relationship with their father or if their parents drink.**



Table C: Have you ever had a whole alcoholic drink - more than just a sip/taste?

	Baseline Age 12-13 Intervention %	Baseline Age 12-13 Comparison %	Survey 4 Age 15-16 Intervention %	Survey 4 Age 15-16 Comparison %
Yes	41	43	64	79
No	57	55	35	21
No response	2	2	2	1
N =	2142	2268	900	1146

A single response question.

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

Source: NFER surveys November 2011-January 2012 and January to March 2015

Table D: How often do you usually drink alcohol? (Among the whole sample)

How often do you usually have an alcoholic drink?	Baseline Age 12-13 Intervention %	Baseline Age 12-13 Comparison %	Survey 4 Age 15-16 Intervention %	Survey 4 Age 15-16 Comparison %
Only a few times a year/ special occasions	29	32	30	38
Once a month or more (frequently)	7	8	29	37
I never drink alcohol now	5	4	5	3
Never had a drink	57	55	35	21
No response	2	2	1	1
N =	2142	2268	900	1146

A single response question.

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

Source: NFER surveys November 2011-January 2012 and January to March 2015

In terms of the negative consequences of drinking alcohol when aged 15/16, a quarter of those taught the Talk about Alcohol programme compared with 32% of the comparison schools had ever had a hangover; 18% compared with 24% respectively had ever got sick, while 17% compared with 21% had ever done something they regretted.

The AET believe that their class based activities, that get younger children to think about what they would do in risky situations and provide enough information before they begin drinking, is what makes the difference.

Helena Conibear Director of The Trust commented "children are fascinated by pictures of diseased livers being shown, or ex addicts coming into schools with cautionary tales of what could happen to them, but think, 'well that's not me I'd never let that happen'. Evidence from other research shows that such approaches are limited in impact. We've found that by relating to their world and getting kids to work things out for themselves through working in groups and through fun activities, thankfully, we can delay the age they start drinking. Our approach is very much around letting them work out for themselves why it makes sense to wait until they're older if they choose to drink. We also reach out to parents, who are the key suppliers of alcohol to teenagers, and make teachers feel more comfortable and confident around the subject".

Sarah Lynch, Senior Research Manager at NFER, said: "We have evaluated the Talk about Alcohol programme over the last four years and our evidence has consistently shown that it is effective at delaying the age at which teenagers start to drink. Young people told us that they prefer to receive information about alcohol from lessons at school and teachers find the Talk about Alcohol sessions straightforward to deliver and engaging for students. This evidence suggests that Talk about Alcohol is an effective early intervention programme".

Executive summary: www.alcoholeducationtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/TAA-nfer-exec-summary.pdf

Full report and findings at: www.alcoholeducationtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/TAA-nfer-full-report.pdf

See also Sec-Ed article: www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/lets-talk-about-alcohol/ and excerpts on Good Morning Britain 02/09/2015 <https://www.itv.com/itvplayer/>

