School-based drug prevention: What works?

When selecting resources or programs to use in your classroom, it is important to consider the “evidence base” (e.g. research) that shows whether they will be effective. Below is an overview of what the research tells us about what works and what doesn’t work.

What works?
- School-based interventions based on social influence and/or skills development (e.g. refusal skills, problem-solving) are helpful for reducing alcohol and drug use.
- There are a number of multi-component programs that have been developed and tested in the Australian context and shown to reduce alcohol and/or drug use (e.g., Climate Schools; SHARHP; for a full list see Recommended Programs).
- There is some evidence that interactive teaching is more effective than passive teaching methods, although additional research to investigate this question is needed.

What doesn’t work?
- We are not aware of any Australian school-based interventions that cause harm.

What's uncertain?
- There may be added benefits when combining universal programs (interventions delivered to all school students) with specific interventions targeting high-risk students (e.g. those students with risk factors for harmful substance use). This question is currently under investigation.

What does evidence-based mean?
To say that a resource is “evidence-based” is to say that it is informed or supported by evidence. The evidence that supports a particular resource may take different forms.

In the case of the factsheets listed on Positive Choices, “evidence-based” means that the information provided in these factsheets comes from a reliable information source and is backed by research studies. For example, the "Party Drugs”/MDMA/Ecstasy factsheet was developed by a leading research institute (National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre). To develop the factsheet, researchers conducted a review of published research studies reporting on the patterns of use, effects and harms associated with the drug ecstasy. This means we can be confident that the information is fact-based and accurate.

In the case of a school-based prevention programs, “evidence-based” typically means that the benefits of the program have been tested in a research study. For example, the Climate Schools Alcohol and Cannabis module is an evidence-based prevention program, because it has been tested and shown to have benefits in a randomised controlled trial. A randomised controlled trial is a study in which roughly half of the participants are randomly allocated to receive the program being tested (in this case, Climate Schools), and the others are randomly allocated to receive a comparison program (in this case, standard drug education for NSW schools). By randomly allocating participants and comparing different approaches, this type of study design provides strong evidence. In this example we can say that Climate Schools is an evidence-based program because students who received the program drank less and used cannabis less over the follow-up period compared to students who received standard drug education.

The evidence-base for resources is important, as this helps us to judge how reliable and effective the resource is. To help you evaluate the resources listed on the Positive Choices portal, we provide information about who developed the resources (under “Developers”), and the evidence that supports the resource (under “Evidence Base”). We also provide an “Evidence Rating” as a shortcut to help users assess the strength of the evidence supporting each resource.

How do I choose which drug education resources to use?
In selecting a resource or prevention program to use in your classroom, it is useful to consider whether the resource:
- Is tailored to the appropriate age and developmental level
- Is culturally appropriate for the class
- Has been implemented previously in similar settings and with similar students
- Will be engaging and motivating for students
- Fits well within the Australian Curriculum
- Requires specific training and/or materials
- Is fact-based and accurate. Does the information come from a reliable source?
- Is evidence-based. Has the resource been tested and proven to produce beneficial outcomes for young people?
Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review by researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of Sydney, the National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, and the National Drug Research Institute at Curtin University.

The summary of what works/doesn't work is based on the conclusion reached by the following reviews:


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