

## Drug Education

## Initial priorities

**Understanding risk**

Young people see 'risk' differently to older people. It is implied in much alcohol education that risk is something negative and to be avoided – however, for some students at least, risk is something to be sought out and embraced. In other words, there may be unintended consequences in placing too much emphasis on the 'danger' and 'risk' associated with certain behaviours. An example is the way in which standard drinks labelling can be used by some young people to determine the most 'efficient' beverages to achieve intoxication in the shortest time and/or for the lowest price.

**Scare tactics/"Health terrorism"**

Scare tactics may be effective and appropriate for some students in some contexts. However, the evidence about their effectiveness is mixed, and they are by no means the 'obvious choice' for alcohol education with secondary students. Scare tactics which are too graphic and disturbing can be readily blocked out by target audiences, and those which are seen to be too extreme and at odds with students' own lived experiences can be rejected as unrealistic. It is important to bear in mind that 'being shocked by' and remembering something (such as a video of a car wreck or an interview with an alcoholic) does not necessarily ensure that it will influence students' own behaviour and choices.

**Differential effect**

Information will be received differently depending on past experiences and students' observations of their friends, peers, siblings and also influenced by wider familial, media and community contexts. Students' perceptions of their peers attitudes and behaviours are particularly powerful, and this aspect may be a missing link in the current curriculum (see page 4). Additionally, students are sensitive to any perceived hypocrisy on the part of teachers, particularly if the 'dangers of alcohol' aspect is over-emphasised. This may be of particular concern in small rural/regional communities where teachers' private lives may be 'less private' than is the case in larger communities.

**Interactivity**

It is well established that students will be more receptive to approaches which are active and interactive than those which involve didactic style teaching or learning of facts. Of critical importance is an 'emotional hook' and clear relevance to their lives/experiences/activities. This is challenging, given the huge variety of student backgrounds and experiences. A particularly exciting set of opportunities exists relating to the development of strategies and activities that utilise digital technologies to engage 'the thumb generation'.

**Evaluation**

Evaluating previous and current programs and practices will indicate those areas that have worked/are working or possible not working so appropriate tailoring can take place.

**Guest speakers/presenters**

Despite their being an inherent appeal (for teachers and students) in having guest speakers/presenters involved in delivering alcohol education to secondary students, the central role and key importance of teachers must not be overlooked. Specifically, efforts should be directed to ensuring that teachers do not become disempowered or fatalistic about their capacity to 'make a difference' in students' lives. Teachers are uniquely positioned to guide and influence students and should be reminded of this on a regular basis!

**Relevance of gender**

Although the differences between boys' and girls' alcohol consumption have diminished in recent years, there may be benefit in having particular activities/discussions about alcohol in single-sex groupings. Students of both genders may be hesitant to speak openly about some issues in mixed gender groups, and both research and anecdotal evidence suggests that there are some alcohol-related issues that are gender-specific.

**Perpetuation of stereotypes**

Educators, teachers and others should be mindful of the language they use when speaking about alcohol consumption. For instance 'alcohol abuse' should not be used synonymously with 'alcohol consumption', and it should not be implied that people who occasionally consume to excess are 'alcoholics'. It is also important for adults to avoid covertly or overtly stating that 'all teenagers binge drink'. This can have important implications for the normative climate, as will be discussed later.

**Social and cultural factors**

Many Australians see alcohol use as normal, sociable and expected. Alcohol plays a role in many social occasions and is embedded in the Australian vernacular. It is often associated with positive values such as 'mateship', and for many young people it is viewed as an important rite of passage, with drinking or getting drunk seen by some as synonymous with being an adult.

Some groups in Australia have a different cultural history and different attitude to alcohol use. Patterns of alcohol use amongst first generation migrant groups often reflect the attitudes of their homeland rather than those of contemporary Australia. For example, some religious groups abstain from alcohol.