

This entry is our account of a review or synthesis of research findings collected by Drug and Alcohol Findings. Citation here does not imply that the document is particularly relevant to Britain and of particular merit, though it may well be both. Unless indicated otherwise, permission is given to distribute this entry or incorporate passages in other documents as long as the source is acknowledged including the web address <http://findings.org.uk>. The original review was not published by Findings; click on the [Title](#) to obtain copies. Free reprints may also be available from the authors – click [prepared e-mail](#) to adapt the pre-prepared e-mail message or compose your own message. Links to source documents are in [blue](#). Hover mouse over [orange](#) text for explanatory notes. The Summary is intended to convey the findings and views expressed in the review. Below are some comments from Drug and Alcohol Findings.

Open [home page](#). Get free [e-mail alerts](#) about new studies. Search studies by [topic](#) or [free text](#)

## ► School-based programmes that seem to work: Useful research on substance use prevention or suspicious stories of success?

Pape H.

**Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs: 2009, 26(6), p. 521–535.**

Unable to obtain a copy by clicking title? Try asking the author for a reprint by adapting this [prepared e-mail](#) or by writing to Dr Pape at [hp@sirus.no](mailto:hp@sirus.no).

*According to a commentator, this "trenchant critique" of the evidence for school-based alcohol and drug prevention curricula is "unfortunately, largely on target". The focus is on methodological concerns which might undermine positive findings, and on whether these survive a programme's transplantation to real-world conditions.*

**Summary** School-based prevention programmes targeted at adolescent substance use rarely seem to have the desired effects on behaviour. Some outcome studies do conclude that such programmes have been successful, but they are relatively few. Nevertheless the body of published research in this field may originate from unrealistic optimism due to publication bias and underreporting of no or counterproductive effects. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the literature is biased in favour of studies with positive findings.

Moreover, nearly all the studies have been carried out by programme developers, and it is well known that researchers with vested interests are more likely to bring 'good news' than independent researchers. Rather than approaching the field with critical reflection, some evaluators have intended to prove that school-based prevention works and have conducted their research accordingly. Examples of questionable analytical approaches and selective reporting of positive findings are consequently not hard to find.

The external validity of evaluation studies with favourable outcomes is also often questionable because almost exclusively they have assessed the effects of programmes delivered under optimal rather than real-life conditions.

In conclusion, the empirical 'evidence' in favour of school-based substance use prevention programmes is generally weak and does not permit a recommendation for the widespread dissemination of any specific programme. School-based programmes might instead be diverted from the unrealistic objective of reducing pupils' substance use to factual teaching. A more appropriate target for education which seeks to reduce alcohol-related harm might be to engender support for truly effective prevention policies such as raising prices and restricting availability.

**FINDINGS** In one easy-to-read article, the author from the [Norwegian Institute for Alcohol and Drug Research](#) brings together the most telling methodological criticisms of research on the effectiveness of school-based substance use prevention programmes. The link given for the article also offers access to commentaries in the same issue of the journal.

While findings on substance use education programmes of the kind usually researched [have been disappointing](#) and subject to methodological concerns, it remains possible that the results of other school-based prevention programmes will prove more robust. Among these may be:

- [Counselling](#) pupils identified at school as using substances.
- Education focused mainly on [reducing harm](#) from substance use rather than or as well as delaying use.
- Generic [child development](#) and classroom management programmes, including some conducted at school in the early years.

Also, while it does seem that the research does not support widespread deployment of alcohol/drug education in schools as a use prevention strategy, it has still [been recommended](#) by Britain's National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence for potentially important roles including increasing knowledge, exploring attitudes, and developing decision-making, social and other life skills.

Among the specific targets of the critique are the following issues also addressed in Effectiveness Bank analyses:

- Questions over the superiority of drug education programmes delivered through [interactive teaching](#) methods.
- Limitations of research on the [Life Skills Training](#) curriculum, widely considered the most securely evidenced substance use education programme for schools.
- Findings that trials conducted by independent researchers do not replicate the more positive findings from research conducted by the developers of school-based substance use prevention programmes (1 2).
- When more widely disseminated in more [real-world conditions](#), programmes found effective in small studies in selected schools with highly trained and supervised teachers or external specialists have sometimes not maintained their promise.
- Sometimes the above two limitations go together, more real-world studies by independent researchers [failing to replicate](#) the more positive findings of research conducted by the developers in smaller studies under optimal conditions.

See also this Effectiveness Bank [hot topic](#) for a discussion of drug education in general.

*This draft entry is currently subject to consultation and correction by the study authors and other experts.*

Last revised 04 October 2013. First uploaded 30 September 2013

- [Comment on this entry](#)
- [Give us your feedback on the site \(one-minute survey\)](#)
- Open Effectiveness Bank [home page](#) and [enter e-mail address](#) to be alerted to new studies

## Top 10 most closely related documents on this site. For more try a [subject](#) or [free text](#) search

Education's uncertain saviour STUDY 2000

The effectiveness of a school-based substance abuse prevention program: 18-month follow-up of the EU-Dap cluster randomized controlled trial STUDY 2010

One-year follow-up evaluation of the Project Towards No Drug Abuse (TND) dissemination trial STUDY 2010

Substances, adolescence (meta-analysis) STUDY 2003

The effects of Project ALERT one year past curriculum completion STUDY 2010

Bridging the gap between evidence and practice: a multi-perspective examination of real-world drug education STUDY 2010

Substance use outcomes 5½ years past baseline for partnership-based, family-school preventive interventions STUDY 2008

Drug prevention best done by school's own teachers not outside specialists STUDY 2005

Family programme improves on school lessons STUDY 2003

Effects of a school-based prevention program on European adolescents' patterns of alcohol use STUDY 2011

DOWNLOAD PDF  
for saving to  
your computer