

## Drinking, Smoking, Drugs and Sexual Intercourse - Education and Influences for Young People in Northern Ireland

by Sarah Hannaford

Over the last few years, the incidences of alcohol, tobacco, illegal drug and solvent use have been increasing. According to the Health Promotion Agency (2005), in Northern Ireland smoking alone is responsible for around 3,000 deaths per year. It has been estimated that the total social cost of alcohol misuse in Northern Ireland is £770 million per annum. The Health Promotion Agency defines social cost as the cost to the individual, community and society, Health and Social Services, employment sector and public services and safety sectors.

There are many projects put in place throughout Northern Ireland to educate young people about the potentially harmful effects of tobacco, alcohol and drug use as well as the consequences of too early or unprotected sexual intercourse. The 2004 **Young and Life Times (YLT)** survey asked 1,983 16-year olds across Northern Ireland whether they had:

- used tobacco, alcohol or illegal drugs;
- experienced sexual intercourse;
- received education in these areas;
- what they thought the main influence was on their attitudes to alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs and sexual intercourse.

854 16-year olds responded to the survey.

### Education and young people

Education on these issues is seen as an important tool for the promotion of a healthy lifestyle and informed decision-making. But is this tool working?

Encouragingly, the majority of young

people indicated that they had received education in school on the use of tobacco, alcohol and illegal drugs as well as on sexual intercourse a few times or many times (Table 1). Approximately four fifths of both males and females said they had received education concerning illegal drugs. Education regarding alcohol consumption was lower than that of illegal drugs, but around three quarters of both males and females said they had received lessons or seen videos covering this subject. The percentage of those receiving education on smoking and on sexual intercourse a few or many times was lower again, but still seven out of ten respondents said they had received education on these topics. Respondents received the least information on solvent abuse. Whilst there was little difference in how much information males and females received in most areas, it was noticeable that females were significantly more likely than males to receive information on sexual intercourse.

### Behaviour

YLT also asked respondents whether they had used any of the substances and whether they had experienced sexual intercourse. Table 2 shows the percentage of males and females who said they had never done this compared to those who had done so a few or many times.

Table 2: Young people saying they...

	%			
	Never		A few or many times	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Drunk alcohol	25	22	68	69
Smoked tobacco	55	48	31	38
Had sexual intercourse	75	80	20	15
Used illegal drugs	77	83	16	10
Had taken solvents	94	94	2	4

Table 1: Respondents saying they had received education a few times or many times on:

	%		
	Male	Female	All
Illegal Drugs	81	80	80
Alcohol	73	76	75
Smoking	71	74	72
Sexual Intercourse	67	73	70
Solvents	66	65	65

Over two thirds of young people said they had drunk alcohol a few or many times. This shows that alcohol is readily available for most young people in Northern Ireland before the legal age of drinking. There was little difference between genders. The gender difference was greater in terms of tobacco use. Males were significantly more likely than females to say that they had never smoked (55% and 48%). YLT also found a gender difference with regard to the use of illegal drugs. More males (16%) than females (10%) said they had used illegal drugs a few or many times. Very few males or females said they had used solvents to get high.

In contrast, more males (20%) than females (15%) indicated having had sexual

intercourse a few or many times. Again, it is interesting to note in terms of the legal age of sexual consent in Northern Ireland, (17 years) that one out of five (21%) of all respondents said that they had had intercourse at least on one occasion. YLT received a number of comments from young people with regard to the legal age at which people can drink or have sexual intercourse. One respondent felt:

**“Too many young people my age are active in all these areas. Many of them are or soon will be legally allowed to have sex, that’s fine. I think all people should wait at least, until they are legally allowed to drink, smoke, etc”.**

## Influences on young people’s views

Lessons in formal education settings are regarded as an important tool in helping young people in making informed decisions regarding the consumption of alcohol, tobacco and drugs, as well as the timing of sexual intercourse, but clearly they are not the only factor influencing young people. One respondent stated:

**“Being educated about these things has changed my view, but ultimately it has been discussions amongst my peer group that has influenced my decisions.”**

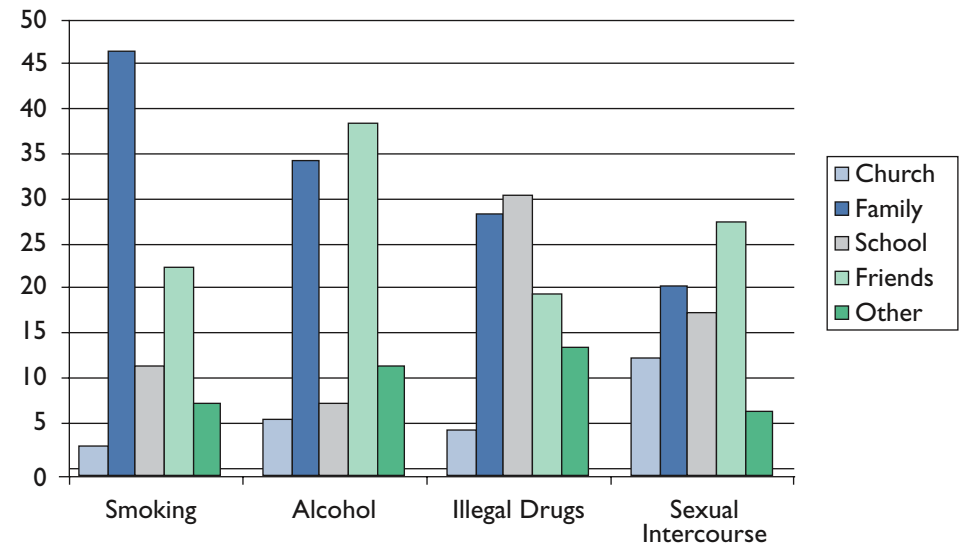
The 2004 YLT survey asked respondents what they felt influenced them most in their decisions to use tobacco, alcohol and drugs, or to have sexual intercourse. The results are summarised in Figure 1.

By far, family acts as the main influence with regard to smoking, with 47% of young people saying that this was their main influence when deciding whether to smoke or not. One respondent commented:

**“Home life can have a lot to do with some of the decisions you make”.**

Friends had the strongest influence on respondents’ views on alcohol consumption and sexual intercourse (39% and 27%). School, on the other hand, was the greatest influence on respondents’ views on illegal drugs with almost one third (31%) of young people indicating that this was their strongest influence. Church had very little impact on respondents’ views. Interestingly, the

Figure 1: Main influences (in %) on young people’s views on...



church influence was significantly higher in the area of sexual matters than in any other area, with 13% of respondents saying church influenced their views on sexual matters most. Unsurprisingly there was a significant difference between young people depending on what religious affiliation they had. Only 2% of those who did not belong to any religion said that church had the strongest influence on their views on sexual matters, whereas church constituted the biggest influence for 11% of Catholics and for 20% of Protestants. The comments from young people reflected that sexuality constitutes the most sensitive issue of all and was hence treated differently by agents of socialisation. One respondent said, for example:

**“The schools seem to do a good job in telling you the dangers of drugs but they never seem to tell you the disadvantages and advantages of sexual intercourse”.**

Another respondent commented in a very personal way:

**“I think there should be better education in schools about these matters. I have never been taught about sex, STD’s or contraception and maybe if I was then it would have helped me to make a better informed decision in the future and prevent teen pregnancy.”**

A small proportion of young people mentioned other factors that influenced their views. Most other influences were mentioned with regard to smoking. Of

those, many commented that television advertisements and the media play a significant role. Others commented that they had made their decision themselves, using their own judgement. The comments reflected that awareness about their own health was also an important factor when respondents decided whether or not to participate in these activities. There were several interesting other comments such as “My dislike of ‘peer pressure’” and “I’m a singer - Me - My choice” that show young people are thinking about these issues before deciding whether to engage in them.

Peer pressure is a theme that is constantly focused on by many professionals working with young people. Young people themselves commented on the extent of peer pressure they experienced, and comments show that the levels of peer pressure experienced by young people vary. One respondent stated:

**“I think people make out that peer pressure is the reason for many people to do the above activities underage, however I feel that it is not that big a reason for their participation and it’s not hard to just say no”.**

However, another respondent said:

**“I find that young people are put under a lot of pressure from their peers to smoke, drink, take drugs or have sex and I don’t think that they can talk to many people about it like family or teachers, as they are scared of what they will think”.**

## Where respondents live as an influence on behaviour

YLT found significant differences between young people's experiences in relation to alcohol, smoking, drugs and sexual intercourse and the place where they said they lived.

Table 3 shows that across all six activities there was a significant variation between young people living in urban and rural areas. Those living in a big city were most likely to have participated in all of the activities a few or many times. Over three quarters of those who lived in urban areas said they had drunk alcohol a few times or many times while only just 54% of those living on farms or in country homes said the same. Similarly, of those living in urban areas, just under half said they had smoked tobacco a few or many times compared with less than one quarter of those living in rural areas. The biggest difference existed in terms of illegal drugs. Approximately one third of those who said they lived in a big city had taken illegal drugs a few times or many times compared with just 4% of those who said they lived on a farm or in a country home. Those living in a big city were also most likely to say they had had sexual intercourse a few times or many times (28%) whereas those living rurally were again least likely to have done so.

These findings may have implications in terms of policy making because they raise the issue as to where health and education initiatives should be focused to help young people to make informed decisions about their lifestyles.

Table 3: Respondents, by residential area, who have a few times or many times ...:

	%				
	Big city	Suburbs big city	Small city or town	Country village	Farm or country home
Drunk alcohol	80	76	72	61	54
Smoked tobacco	47	41	41	31	20
Taken illegal drugs	31	14	15	6	4
Had sexual intercourse	28	13	23	16	5
Taken solvent	6	2	5	2	0

## Boredom as an influence?

The findings of the 2004 YLT survey on health-related matters also raise the question about facilities available to young people where they live. Boredom and lack of leisure time facilities have often been linked to an increased intake of alcohol, drugs and even a higher level of sexual activity among young people.

The YLT survey asked respondents how often they were bored at school, and Figure 2 shows that indeed there was a connection between high levels of boredom in school and experiences of tobacco, alcohol and drug use as well as sexual intercourse. Those who said they were rarely or never bored in school were less likely than other respondents to have not drunk alcohol, smoked tobacco, taken drugs or had sexual intercourse.

Respondents who said they were always or often bored at school were much more likely to have experimented in all these areas. The comments received from respondents further confirm that

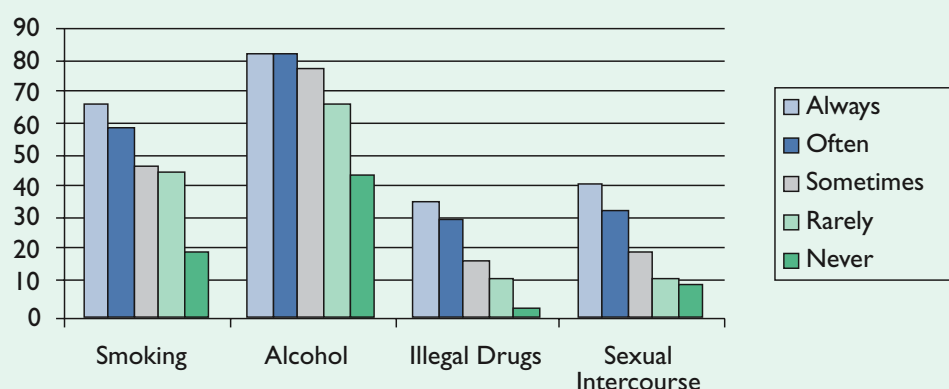
there may be a link between boredom and participation in activities that are potentially harmful for young people's health, as the following three quotes show:

**"I believe that young people today go and drink at clubs because there is nothing else for them to do at their age, until 18. There should be more events for people under 18. I think this would stop underage drinking and drug taking and many people would not need to go to clubs".**

**"Young people in Northern Ireland turn to smoking, drinking, drugs, and sexual matters because there is very little for us to do. Most themes are aimed for children or over 18. Young people are too old to play with toys and too young to go to night clubs, etc".**

**"I live in Omagh and there is absolutely nowhere for people aged 15-18 to go, to have fun or a night out. Therefore people this age must revert to buying fake ID's etc. in order to get out to a night club that will contain people closer to their own age".**

Figure 2: Respondents with experience of alcohol, smoking, drugs and sexual intercourse by boredom in school (%)



## Conclusions

The results of the 2004 YLT survey show that young people are experimenting with alcohol, tobacco, drugs and sexual intercourse on a range of levels. Whereas over two thirds of all respondents had drunk alcohol many or a few times, only about one third of respondents said they had smoked many or a few times. About one in five respondents had participated in sexual intercourse at least once and even fewer respondents had used illegal drugs

or solvents. There are many influences guiding young people in their decisions about smoking, drinking, drug use, solvent abuse and sexual intercourse. Agents of socialisation have the most influence on young people's views, but interestingly young people's behaviour also varied depending on where they lived and their interest in school. It is clear that these issues play an important role in young people's lives and that they feel that they need education and guidance to help them to make informed decisions. One respondent said:

**“I think there should be more awareness on sexual matters. After all, Britain has the highest amount of AIDS and sexually transmitted**

**infections in Europe. Lack of awareness could possibly be causing this. Also, I was shocked when I read in a magazine that a high percentage of teenagers are too scared to ask at a chemist shop for condoms & other forms of contraception.”**

It is important that young people get the information and guidance they need to allow them to make informed decisions about smoking, drinking, drug use, solvent abuse and sexual intercourse as these are very important decisions in their lives. As one young person said:

**“There is never enough specific guidance for those who actually need it.”**

## References

Health Promotion Agency (2005):

[www.healthpromotionagency.org.uk/Work/Alcohol/menu.htm](http://www.healthpromotionagency.org.uk/Work/Alcohol/menu.htm)

[www.healthpromotionagency.org.uk/Work/Tobacco/menu.htm](http://www.healthpromotionagency.org.uk/Work/Tobacco/menu.htm)

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*Sarah Hannaford holds a BA from the University of Vermont is currently a Masters student at the School of Sociology and Social Policy, Queen's University Belfast.*

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## Key Points

- Respondents were most likely to have received lessons on illegal drugs (80%) and alcohol (75%) and least likely to have received lessons on solvents. Two thirds (65%) of respondents said they received lessons on solvents at least once.
- Seven out of ten respondents (69%) said they had drunk alcohol a few or many times. 38% of females and 31% of males said they had smoked tobacco a few or many times. Males (20%) were more likely than females (15%) to say that they had had sexual intercourse. Illegal drug use was more frequent among males (16%) than females (10%).
- Influences on young people's views varied strongly with regard to the subject area. Friends had the strongest influence on views on alcohol and sexual intercourse, school on illegal drugs and parents on smoking.
- Young people living in urban and areas were more likely to have taken any of the substances or to have had sexual intercourse.
- Respondents reporting higher levels of boredom in school were also more likely to report experience of drinking, smoking, illegal drug use and sexual intercourse.

The Young Life and Times survey is carried out annually and records the attitudes and experiences of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland. The Young Life and Times survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what young people think about the social issues of the day. Check the website for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt)) or call the survey team at Queen's University (028 9097 3947) with any queries.

**In collaboration with Queen's University, Belfast and University of Ulster**

Aberfoyle House Magee Campus University of Ulster  
Northland Road Londonderry BT48 7JA  
Tel: 028 7137 5513 Fax: 028 7137 5510  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)

Institute of Governance Public Policy and Social Research  
Queen's University Belfast Belfast BT7 INN  
Tel: 028 9097 3034 Fax: 028 9097 2551  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)