

Drug education

Year 9, Lesson 2: Exploring attitudes



Exploring attitudes

This is the second of five drug education lessons, for year 9. This lesson explores types of illegal drugs and focuses on young people's perceptions about the prevalence of, and attitudes towards, drug use.

Classroom-ready PowerPoint versions of the lesson plans are available to [members](#) of the PSHE Association.

Learning objective

To learn about drugs and young people's attitudes and behaviours regarding drug use.

Learning outcomes

Students will be able to:

- describe the names, appearance and effects of a range of illegal drugs
- analyse their attitudes and beliefs about the prevalence of drug use amongst young people
- assess the reasons why young people might choose to use or not use drugs

Climate for learning

Make sure you have read the accompanying teacher guidance notes before teaching this lesson. These include relevant subject knowledge for this topic, guidance on creating a safe learning environment, and curriculum links.

Resources required

- Box or envelope for questions
- Resource 1: *Guess the statistic quiz* [one per pair]
- Resource 2: *Reasons for and against drug use* [optional - one per student]
- Resource 2a: *Reasons for and against drug use- alternative* [support option, as required]
- Resource 3: *Types and effects card sort* [cut up, one set per pair]
- Resource 3a: *Matching types and effects* [support option, as required]

Baseline assessment

Introduction (Slides 10–11, 5 mins)

Ensure ground rules are established with the group before teaching this lesson and make students aware of the question box, which will be available throughout the lesson. Remind students that if they have worries or questions during or after the lesson, that they do not want to raise in front of the class, they can write their question on a piece of paper, anonymously or with their name, and put it in the question box.

Introduce the learning objective and outcomes and explain that today's lesson will explore attitudes towards drug use and key information about drugs.

Baseline assessment activity (Slide 12, 10 mins)

Working on their own, ask students to write their response to the statement shown on slide 12: "Everyone uses drugs when they're young – what's the problem?!". They should respond as fully as possible, explaining the extent to which they agree/disagree and their reasons.

Whilst students complete this activity on their own, move around the room to monitor their responses and establish their current understanding, beliefs, attitudes, any misconceptions and gaps in knowledge, to adapt teaching during this lesson.

Core activities

Exploring social norms (Slide 13, 10 mins)

In pairs, give students **Resource 1: Guess the statistic quiz** and ask them to complete the quiz, guessing what they think the correct statistic is. Once they have finished, ask students to hold up mini white boards/paper with their guess written on for each question.

Share the answers with students and discuss how close they were to guessing the correct answer:

1. *1% of 11-15-year-olds are 'regular' smokers (meaning 99% are not), and you may wish to remind students that, according to ASH (2023), in 11-17-year-olds, only 3.6% vape more than once a week, and 3.9% vape less than once a week.*
2. *63% of 11-15-year-olds have never tried an alcoholic drink.*
3. *7% of 11-15-year-olds have ever tried cannabis (meaning 93% have not).*
4. *3% of 11-15-year-olds have ever tried nitrous oxide (meaning 97% have not).*
5. *4% of 11-15-year-olds have tried illegal drugs in the last month (meaning 94% have not).*

Develop discussion further by asking students:

- Have any of these statistics surprised you?
- (For those who have previously done the lessons for years 7–8) Were your guesses more accurate this time than when you did similar activities in earlier lessons?
- Why do you think perceptions of young people's drug use are sometimes inaccurate, even amongst young people themselves?

- How might young people's perceptions of their peers' behaviour impact on their own behaviour?
- How might media portrayal of young people's behaviour impact on a young person's behaviour?

Students will likely have overestimated peers' use of alcohol and drugs – perhaps due to media influence, misinformation/misreporting among their peer group or a higher rate of usage among an individual's social circle. Young people who believe most of their peers are involved in using drugs and alcohol are more likely to use them themselves. It is therefore crucial to emphasise (as students saw in relation to alcohol in the Year 7/8 lessons) how low drug use prevalence actually is; it is more common for young people not to use drugs. Reputable data from anonymous surveys like these show that rates of teenage drug and alcohol use are low and have significantly declined over the last 20 years.

Similar activities are used in the lessons for years 7-8, so if your students have done these lessons in earlier years, you may see that their guesses were more accurate – evidence that their perceptions have shifted somewhat.

Discussion of social norms needs to be handled with care in order to ensure that students at higher risk are not excluded – see the accompanying evidence briefing for further guidance on handling social norms with care.

Reasons for and against drug use (Slides 14-15, 10 mins)

Ask students to divide a page in their book into two columns, or give them **Resource 2: Reasons for and against drug use**. Ask them to work in pairs to create lists or a mind map of all the reasons people might give for and against using drugs.

Take feedback. Students might suggest:

Reasons for drug use:

- *For fun, makes people feel happy/confident, they think drugs will relax them or give them an interesting experience*
- *To be accepted in a friendship group, peer pressure, to impress someone, want to seem 'cool'*
- *They believe everyone else is doing it, they have friends/family members who use drugs, influence of the media and it seems 'the norm'*
- *They are curious and/or like taking risks*
- *They want to escape reality, perhaps because of traumatic experiences and/or difficult feelings*
- *They want to feel better/get over an illness and use drugs to try to do this*
- *They believe some drugs might change their appearance, strength or ability in a sport*

Reasons against drug use:

- *Concerns over health risks and short-term effects e.g. addiction, hangovers and heightened accident risks*
- *Valuing a healthy lifestyle in which drugs are not a feature*
- *Religious/cultural beliefs or family-based reasons such as family disapproval of drug use*
- *Pre-existing medical condition that means using drugs would be particularly harmful*
- *To avoid losing control or acting in unwanted ways while under the influence*
- *Having a great time without drugs*
- *Feeling comfortable making their own choices, so feeling able to resist peer influence*
- *Worried about breaking the law or getting caught*
- *Understanding that seeking advice from a doctor for physical or mental health concerns would be more beneficial than using drugs, and can give longer-term, safe, help and support*

- *Wanting to train and practise to improve in a sport or physical activity, rather than use drugs which can have serious consequences and are often banned in competitive sports*

Then, ask students to discuss the reasons for and against the use of drugs, based on the following questions:


- Are any of the reasons in favour of drug use based on inaccurate beliefs?
- How could someone argue against these inaccurate beliefs?
- Which reasons do they believe are the strongest reasons against drug use and why?

It is essential that through discussion and feedback, students have an opportunity to challenge the reasons suggested above.

Key points include:

- *Substance use is not a medical treatment for stress or depression, and whilst there might be short term relief of symptoms, in the long-term it can make those symptoms worse, which is why these drugs aren't prescribed by doctors.*
- *Using drugs can affect decision-making which can increase the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours. If the individual is already in a risky situation or with people they do not know or trust, their level of vulnerability will increase when under the influence of drugs.*
- *As shown in the statistics above, very few young people are actually involved in drug use.*
- *Distinguish between legal (e.g. medicinal) and illegal drug use. Some controlled substances are being used in experimental medical treatments which some students may argue shows the laws on drugs are flawed. In response, emphasise the differences in purity between substances used in medical settings and street drugs (the purity of which is difficult to establish, and it is not possible to tell what the drug has been cut with unless chemical testing is conducted). Additionally, emphasise that such trials use carefully controlled dosages prescribed under the care of a medical professional with the aim of treating a diagnosed condition.*
- *Some drugs are 'synthetic', meaning they are developed in a laboratory and are designed to mimic the original drug. These can be more potent, and the effects may be more severe, which increases the risks in comparison to the original drug.*
- *So-called 'performance enhancing drugs', including anabolic steroids, can have a range of negative effects, including high blood pressure, increased risk of liver failure and heart attacks. They can slow down growth and impact fertility. They can affect users' mental health too, such as causing increased paranoia and aggression. These substances are often banned by professional sporting bodies, and athletes found with traces of these drugs in their system will face being banned.*

 **Support:** Ask students to use two colours to indicate the reasons a person might give for and against using drugs in **Resource 2a: Reasons for and against drug use - alternative**.

 **Challenge:** Ask students to script an exchange between friends discussing why they choose not to use drugs.

Types of drugs (Slide 16, 10 mins)

Working in pairs, students sort the cards in **Resource 3: Types and effects card sort** to match two 'effects' cards to each drug type. Circulate amongst groups to gauge responses.

Share the answers using a copy of Resource 3 that has not been cut up (correct answers are next to each drug type). Ask students one thing that surprised them or that they did not know about one of the drug types.

Key learning:

- Different types of drugs have a range of effects. Sometimes they will have some effects in common. For example: both LSD and cannabis have been linked to paranoia; both depressants and stimulants give feelings of pleasure – though in differing levels of intensity.
- While the effects of some types of drug are pleasurable, there are also a range of effects that the same drug can cause, including effects that can damage health directly or increase the vulnerability of a person using them.
- It is important that students note that it is difficult to know whether a ‘street’ drug contains what it is claimed to contain or not, it is also hard to know what the drug is mixed with. Therefore, the effects of these drugs are hard to predict.
- Additionally, students should understand that mixing different drugs (including alcohol) can be dangerous.

 **Support:** Ask students to sort the simplified **Resource 3a: Matching types and effects cards**. These have a reduced number of effects described.

 **Challenge:** Ask students to write a short news item or script explaining why the effects of street drugs cannot be guaranteed.

Reflection and endpoint assessment

Reflection and endpoint assessment (Slide 17, 5 mins)

Ask students to revisit the baseline statement: What would you say to someone who says “Everyone uses drugs when they’re young – what’s the problem?!”.

Using their learning from the lesson, ask students what they would say now in response to this? Students should write their response, using a different colour pen, in their exercise book or on an ‘exit card’ to be handed in before they leave the classroom. This can be used to demonstrate progress and inform future teaching.

Signposting support

Signposting support (Slide 18, 5 mins)

Remind students that they can access support at home, and both in school (through their form tutor, pastoral lead, or school police officer/police community support officer) and out of school, through local and national organisations. Share the following websites and phone numbers with students:

- Childline - www.childline.org.uk 0800 1111
- Talk to Frank - www.talktofrank.com/get-help

Extension activity

Generating questions (Slide 19)

Ask students to write down any questions they would like to ask about drugs, their health impact and the law. These could be written on post-it notes and added to the question box. Ensure time is provided in the next lesson to answer students’ questions.

Generating questions for a police officer (*if you are planning a police visit*)(Slide 20)

You may be planning to have a police officer visit the school to help support your teaching of this topic area. The next lesson, on drugs and the law, would best suit the expertise of a police officer. Further guidance on police in the classroom can be found on the [PSHE Association website](#).

Explain to the group that a police officer is visiting to teach them about drugs, the law and policing. Ask students to generate any questions they would like to ask the police officer. These could be written on post-it notes, collected and shared with the police officer before their visitⁱⁱ.

ⁱ Statistics from: National Health Service, 2023 Smoking, Drinking and Drug use among young people in England.

ⁱⁱ For more on working with police officers in the classroom and how to ensure sessions are safe and effective, see [POLICE IN THE CLASSROOM: A handbook for the police and PSHE teachers](#), PSHE Association, 2019.