

Steering teenagers away from drink and drugs

Project enjoying great success in Iceland is being implemented to improve lives of Scottish youths

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YOUNG

Efforts to tackle Scotland's substance abuse problem often feel like an endless game of whack-a-mole. Despite police disrupting the importation, supply and sale of illegal drugs more effectively than ever, demand means that users will always find new ways to get their hands on illicit substances.

Alcohol consumption and smoking levels are not much better. Vape usage is on the rise, despite decades of crackdowns on cigarette smoking. Scotland's problematic drinking culture starts early in our young people, with a recent report finding that 25% of Scottish teenagers had been drunk in the last year.

But what if we tried to cut demand as well as supply? What if we could stop young people from wanting to go down the road of substance abuse at all?

It might sound far fetched but in Iceland it is already a reality. In the late 1990s, a study found that 42% of Icelandic teens had been drunk in the previous 30 days. When repeated recently, that number had dropped to a remarkable 6%. Iceland now has one of the lowest rates of teen substance abuse in Europe.

Much of the credit can be put down to the Icelandic Prevention Model, or Planet Youth. In the late 1990s, Icelandic community leaders and politicians began to implement early intervention techniques that would indirectly encourage children to stay away from alcohol, smoking and drugs.

They brought together communities of parents, teachers, charities and local businesses to offer opportunities to young people that were not there before. They asked teenagers to take anonymous surveys to find out about what was happening in their lives and



local areas, so that any work could be specifically tailored to the needs of each individual community.

"It was a move away from putting the responsibility on young people to 'just say no', when we as adults can't even do that," said Zahra Hedges, chief executive of youth charity Winning Scotland. "We might stay out to have another drink when we said we wouldn't, or we might have another slice of chocolate cake when we know it's bad for us. Yet we expect young people whose brains are still developing to have more self-control than we do.

"What they decided to do in Iceland was to take a scientific approach. They identified things that were associated with positive decisions and factors that correlated more with negative choices.

"Their approach was simple – provide more of the positive experiences in young people's lives and do what they can to remove the negative stuff."

The Icelandic Prevention Model is a decades-long project that requires constant maintenance and hard work. Every year, Icelandic teens take an anonymous survey and Planet Youth report

their findings to parents and communities. This allows the project to identify and keep track of emerging negative influences on young people.

Margret Lilja Gudmundsdottir is Planet Youth's chief knowledge officer. She explained: "If we are using an upstream approach and working from local, fresh data in the community, we can inform and change the outcome. We don't work just from how we feel or what we feel should be done. It's dialogue, research, policy and practice, again and again."

Project Youth offers young people the opportunity to try exciting new things that might not have been accessible to them before.

Zahra at Winning Scotland said: "Neuroscience has shown us that teenage brains are wired to take risks – but that doesn't mean that it must be a health harming risk. It could be something physical, like an adrenaline-fuelled sport, or performing on stage. You can give young people a safe space to experience that natural high.

"Young people are often looking for connection, at a

time when they are pulling away from their families and trying to work out who they are. If they don't find it in a healthy place, they might find it in a dark place.

"I watched David Beckham's documentary the same week that I watched a documentary by Graeme Armstrong, a man who used to be in a Coatbridge gang. They were young boys looking for connection, and Beckham found it at Manchester United, while Armstrong found it at a street corner in Coatbridge."

While older people often feel that younger generations

have it easier than they did, Zahra thinks that teenagers today face unprecedented challenges. She said: "Our young people deal with the things we had to when we were younger, like peer pressure, marketing and advertising and lack of sleep.

"But they must deal with a digital layer that makes everything harder. When you go home, you can't escape some of those pressures because they are all on your phone.

"Young people are also very aware of what is going on around them and climate

SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

'Project Youth gave my kids a better childhood'

Margret Lilja Gudmundsdottir may spearhead the Project Youth movement now, but once upon a time she was an off-the-rails teenager who needed help and support.

Margret said: "I am lucky that I survived. I started smoking when I was 11 and drinking when I was 13. It was the norm.

"I've now raised my daughters with Planet Youth, and they had a completely different life. They started school without being intoxicated, they learned to kiss and dance without being completely wasted. They could party without drinking. I have four granddaughters now, and I am fully aware that they face brand new, difficult challenges."

In 2006, about 10 years after Planet Youth came into place in Iceland, Margret began to see a difference in her country's young people. She said: "We saw the results and said 'this is going in the right direction'. But when things go well, parents stop turning up at the meetings.

"I think we have way too many specialists standing in front of parents shaming them. It's important to know that you're not supposed to know everything when we have a child. If we get a puppy, we go to puppy training classes, but we feel embarrassed to ask for help about children. We never want to shame parents; we always want to support them."



Margret of Project youth.

change. The job market they are coming into is very difficult, and there's a lot of anxiety about a future that they can't control and that feels very insecure.

"Young people are afraid to speak up because they are afraid older people will call them snowflakes, but they're not. They're facing challenges we never had to."

Iceland's success eventually caught the notice of the rest of the world, and 22 countries have since implemented Planet Youth methodology in their own countries – Scotland being one of them.

Scotland has the worst drug-related mortality rate in Europe and coronary heart disease across the country have been devastated by the loss of young people to substance abuse.

Winning Scotland was keen to implement the Icelandic Prevention Model here and, a few years ago, went to a Planet Youth conference in Iceland. They were surprised to bump into a group of like-minded community leaders from the Highlands. Zahra said: "We realised there was a lot of interest in Scotland.

"Teenagers are the same all over the world, we just need to respond to the world of the Scottish teenager and support

“Young people face challenges we never had but are afraid to speak up”

Directing young people's energy into positive activities has proven to cut substance abuse issues in Iceland.