

Four traits that point to binge drinking



St Joseph's College students Gus York, Connor Smith, Tom McGregor, Ben Houston and Will Haddad in Hunters Hill, Sydney.
Photo: Janie Barrett

ASKING YOUTH WHAT THEY NEED

Everything changed for Paul Dillon when his cousin died from a heroin overdose.

When he discovered his cousin's problem, Mr Dillon, the founder and director of Drug and Alcohol Research and Training Australia asked him what would have helped. "I was given information that people thought I needed, rather than what I needed," his cousin told him.

Mr Dillon responded to the tragedy by asking teens what they needed. He found they wanted "pillows" - his term for practical tips that would help if a "friend" was in trouble.

"They wanted to know, 'How do I look after a drunk friend?' and 'What do I do if someone's vomiting?'" Mr Dillon said.

Every year, Mr Dillon talks to about 125,000 teenagers at 200 schools across Australia.

Mr Dillon only speaks at schools that have an ongoing commitment to drug and alcohol education.

One school he visits is St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill, which helped develop both the Preventure and the Climate Schools programs.

Headmaster Ross Tarlinton said the school was constantly looking for education programs

Julie Power

Higher than average levels of impulsiveness, sensitivity to anxiety, sensation seeking and hopelessness. These four personality traits have been shown by researchers to predict those teenagers at high risk of becoming binge drinkers with 90 per cent accuracy.

In the first Australian trial, a program targeting 438 year 8 students with one or more of these traits successfully halved the onset of drinking and the incidence of binge drinking for up to three years following the intervention compared with students who didn't participate.

The Preventure program was designed by Professor Patricia Conrod from the University of Montreal more than 10 years ago to modify a teenager's behaviour and thinking. It has been tested on thousands of teenagers around the world - including in the Czech Republic, Canada, Britain and Australia - with similar results.

In the first Australian trial in NSW and Victorian schools, students were classified as high risk using the "Substance Use Risk Profile" scale to determine whether they had higher than average levels of the four personality traits.

Over three years, the private and public school students were asked every six months how often they drank and the frequency of their binge drinking, reported the new research in the *Psychological Medicine* journal.

Students weren't told they were at high risk unless they asked.

Teenagers were taught to manage their personality traits and individual tendencies better, and make better decisions.

Australian researcher Nicola Newton said the "beauty of the

IS YOUR TEENAGER AT RISK?

Children with higher than average levels of these personality traits have been shown to be 90 per cent more likely to develop alcohol and drug problems.

Impulsivity is specifically associated with misuse of stimulants (including cocaine and prescription stimulant medications).

Parents will recognise children who act before thinking it through. **Sensation seeking** is associated with alcohol and cannabis misuse. Some of these children drink and take drugs out of boredom; teenagers may say they want to skydive. **Anxiety sensitivity** is associated with a

preference for depressants, (alcohol, sedatives, opioids). Children with this trait may get scared when nervous or their heart beats fast. **Hopelessness** is associated with depressants, (alcohol, sedatives, opioids). Children may think they're failures.

Source: JAMA Psychiatry

program" was that it was very short, effective, hardly mentioned alcohol or other drugs, yet it reduced the uptake of both while improving mental health.

Another program called Climate Schools, which used cartoons delivered online, was found to be just as effective as Preventure. It is suitable for all students, not only those at risk, and was developed by Associate Professor Newton with UNSW's Professor Maree Teesson.

The number of teenagers binge drinking would be reduced by 250,000 a year if either of these programs was introduced into schools, said Professor Newton, who is the director of prevention research at the NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence in Mental Health and Substance Use.

In a study comparing Preven-

ture with Climate Schools, researchers tracked the drinking behaviour of 2190 year 8 students at 26 public and private schools for three years, according to research papers in *Psychological Medicine* and the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*.

In the past, most school-based prevention programs had minimal effects on reducing alcohol or other drug use, or improving mental health, they argued.

Both the universally available Climate Schools and the targeted Preventure program halved the uptake of drinking and the incidence of binge drinking. Yet delivering the two programs together had no added benefit.

In another trial by Professor Conrod, Preventure decreased illicit drug taking by 80 per cent and improved mental health.

Professor Newton called on Australian schools to incorporate the programs into the curriculum.

"For each year we can delay the onset of drinking, we reduce the chance of developing a full-blown substance abuse disorder by 10 per cent," she said.

"We know if you are going to develop a substance-use disorder, you pretty much have done it by the end of school."

Drinking too much caused 11,000 hospitalisations of young people aged 15-24 every year, 2015 research found.

The latest National Drug Strategy Household Survey showed fewer teens were drinking, with about one in five compared with nearly one in three in 2013.

Most binge drinking peaks in these years when young people are introduced to alcohol.



Drug educator Paul Dillon.

to educate the boys on drug and alcohol that could be integrated across curriculums.

"I am convinced that good information can improve the probability of good outcomes," Mr Tarlinton said. "I don't think you can depend on broad osmosis - you need to be proactive, and a lot of behaviours are learnt."

Instead of focusing on the negative, the school's approach is to highlight the number of teenagers who don't drink.

The school also minimised boredom, and kept students active and engaged by encouraging sports, public speaking, and other activities. Year 12 student Will Haddad, 17, said these sorts of activities helped to take a teenager's mind off "anxious things".

While teenagers now understood the dangers of binge-drinking or taking drugs, most thought it couldn't happen to them, Mr Dillon said.

"If you give them a multiple choice at year 10, they know every danger around alcohol but if someone gave them a bottle of vodka on Saturday night, they'd know that's incredibly dangerous [to someone else] but not themselves," he said. "They are missing the part of the brain that says that could happen to me."