

37. Why are some drugs illegal?

Health warning! When I talk about these issues in school with Year 5 children, I never name any drugs but I let the children say them. This way I feel I am not telling them about something they should not know about, rather, I am helping them to understand a topic they may have limited or confused information about.

INTRODUCTION

Ensure that they understand that this session focuses on one of the things that can lead people into a lot of problems in their life – and about building the resilience to avoid placing yourself in danger.

Ask the children for their ideas about what a drug is and the difference between legal and illegal drugs. Explain that they understand that even medicine-type drugs can be harmful if they are not used by the right person in the right way.

ACTIVITY

Ask the children to name the harmful effects of legal drugs such as alcohol and tobacco. Why might adults take risks by smoking and drinking? Use role-play to explore ideas around this from varying points of view, such as:

- tobacco advertiser;
- someone who has smoked for a long time;
- someone who has just started to smoke;
- a pub landlord;
- someone trying to get you to smoke.

Next think about how governments and health agencies help adults to know about the risks. Why don't all adults listen to and act on the advice? Ask the children to talk in pairs to work out some advice they could give to their teenage selves about drinking alcohol or smoking. Get some of their ideas to share in the group and then ask the children to get together in groups of four or five to create freeze-frames where one person says why they like smoking and another gives a powerful argument against it. For example, a group of friends might be smoking all together at a party – freeze the scene. What could you say to that group to help change their minds about smoking?

ACTIVITY

Introduce the concept of buying drugs. For example, adults can legally buy alcohol, tobacco and (less-harmful) caffeine. Ask the children for their ideas on such questions as:

- why are adults are allowed to buy these drugs and not others that they may have heard of which are illegal?

Bring out points about the limits of freedom of choice and of the history of drug use, e.g., would tobacco have been banned long ago if its harmful effects had been known? Do they know what happened in America when people tried to ban alcohol (The Prohibition)?

- why do some religions prohibit the use of some drugs?

Note that alcohol is (largely) banned in Islam and in some forms of Christianity and caffeine by the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons). Bring out points about drugs that 'intoxicate' the mind, i.e., poisoning the mind so that people can become careless and do damage to their health. Others point out that when alcoholic or caffeinated drinks are used in moderation, they can bring personal and social benefits. There are also uses for alcohol in some rituals, for example, in the sharing of bread and wine at Christian communion services. People draw the line in different places: ask the children for their responses to such questions as:

- why might people have different views about alcoholic drinks?
- when might it be 'safe' to use drugs?

Bring out points about medically supervised use of drugs and proper testing and trialling to treat certain conditions. What do they think of e-cigarettes (vaping) as an alternative to tobacco?

Now create a 'continuum' across the room, with one end of the imaginary line standing for 'Yes, definitely' and the other for 'No, definitely not'. Ask the children to put themselves somewhere along the line according to their answer to such questions as:

- Should all drugs be made legal?
- Should all drugs be made illegal including alcohol and tobacco?
- Beer companies are allowed to advertise but not tobacco industries. Is this fair?
- The government gets a lot of tax (money) from the sale of cigarettes and alcohol. Should all this money go to the NHS to look after people who have illnesses caused by tobacco or alcohol?

After each question, ask a few children to explain their position on the line and allow children to change their position if they want to after hearing a range of views.

CONCLUSIONS

Ask children to vote on the following statement: 'All drugs, including alcohol and tobacco, should be banned'.