

'Legal Highs' and Novel Psychoactive Substances

Alcohol and Drug Prevention Briefing Paper

June 2014

This briefing paper is **part of a series** produced by **Mentor ADEPIS** on alcohol and drug education and prevention, for teachers and practitioners.

Questions for schools

1. What are 'legal highs'?
2. Are they an issue among our pupils?
3. What can schools do?

'Legal highs' and NPS

The growing popularity of Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS) is causing wide confusion among the public. This briefing paper is intended to provide basic information for teachers and practitioners willing to include these substances in their alcohol and drug education programme.

Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS), also known as 'legal highs' are a group of drugs designed to bypass the legislative control of illegal drugs. They attempt to imitate the effects of illegal substances - stimulants, cannabis, depressants or hallucinogens - by either mimicking the pharmacological effects of a specific drug, or by subtly modifying the molecular structure of existing illegal drugs.

Some of the former legal highs, such as Mephedrone, Naphyrone, BZP, GBL and some synthetic cannabinoids, are now controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 - either as Class A, B or C drugs, or through a 'temporary class drug

order' (TCDO)¹. However the fast pace in which these new chemicals are modified and developed makes it challenging for governments to control the wide array of substances, which are readily available on the market.

What challenges do NPS currently present?

- Large number of substances easily accessible;
- Rate at which new substances emerge - approximately 1 new substance per week²;
- Wide internet availability;
- Wide head shop availability;
- Medical difficulty in treating the adverse effects of NPS on the user (mainly in relation to the lack of knowledge around different chemicals used);
- No scrutiny or quality control in the production of these compounds;
- Unknown methods of production or products used;
- Ambiguity concerning dosage/effect/strength;
- Wide and confusing terminology – different terms may be used for the same substance, and same terms may be used for different substances;
- Users' assumption that legal means tested, regulated, hence safe.

Volatile substances

Although similarities in use, trends and issues exist between NPS and volatile substances, it is important to understand that these two categories of substances are very different, specifically with regards to production purposes and legislation.

Volatile substance abuse (VSA) involves the use of gases or vapours from existing household or industrial products – such as glues, air fresheners, hair sprays, keyboard cleaners, gas lighter fuel (butane) - as highs. Whilst NPS – specifically produced as highs - are a relatively new phenomenon, Volatile substance abuse has been practiced since 1800.

The law:

Whilst the legal status of certain NPS is related to the difficulty in controlling new chemicals, volatile substances are legal to possess for their legitimate use.

Legislative overlapping between these two types of substances resides however in the Intoxicating Substances (Supply) Act 1985 (ISA), which prohibits supply of intoxicating substances to individuals under the age of 18, knowing or having “reasonable cause to believe that the substance is, or its fumes are, likely to be inhaled by the person under the age of eighteen for the purpose of causing intoxication”.³ Both volatile substances and any NPS that can be smoked or vaporised (such as synthetic cannabinoids) fall under this act.

Although volatile substances may be considered as 'legal highs', it is very important to understand that they are not Novel Psychoactive Substances.

To find out more about VSA: <http://www.re-solv.org/vsa/>

The rate at which new substances emerge on the market and the wide and unregulated availability of NPS (most of which can be easily purchased on the street, the internet, or in head shops) makes it very difficult to control the production methods or the exact chemicals contained in specific substances.

To add a layer of complexity, many of the existing legal highs also contain – in spite of buyers' awareness - specific ingredients that have been declared illegal to possess⁴. Some legal highs indicate the chemicals they claim to contain; others omit them altogether, which makes it even harder to gauge effects and risks. It is also common that, in the instance of existing labels, these are not reliable and do not necessarily reflect the exact chemicals contained in the product - so users may not know what they are taking.

The broad range of terminology used to name different substances may also create confusion not only among the public, but also among users themselves.

Legal highs – Not all are legal

Herbal highs – Not all are herbal

China White

China White is currently sold as legal high. A bag of China White may contain Methiopropamine – the active ingredient.

Analysis carried out on different samples found that certain also contained caffeine, or one or several other psychoactive drugs and bulking agents. Users may not be aware of taking such an unpredictable mix of substances, which can in fact be risky as very little is known about the effects of these drugs, and their effects in combination.⁵

An example is the NPS Methoxetamine: this substance is called M-Ket in certain areas, which causes confusion between this chemical and Mephedrone (M-Cat – also known as Meow Meow)⁶. Both are class B drugs.

For those working in education, the biggest challenge to tackle is the naivety of users (or potential users) in relation to NPS - including dosage and effects, as well as

the erroneous assumption that the term 'legal high' implies that these substances are well regulated, tested, hence safe.

Is it an issue among our pupils?

According to the United Nations around 670,000 young people aged 15-24 have used NPS in the UK⁷. Although the number of users has increased, the current use of NPS is a relatively low prevalence behaviour.⁸

The 2012/13 Crime Survey estimated that 6.1% of young adults (16-24 year olds) had taken nitrous oxide (also known as laughing gas) in the past year, and 1.1% had taken salvia in the last year.⁹

With respect to volatile substances (such as solvents, gases, and aerosols) and their use among younger people, we have a different picture. Volatile Substance Abuse (VSA) is the most common trend among 11-13 year-olds, and only second to cannabis use among 16 year-olds, however it is important to note that deaths related to the misuse of these substances have decreased from 100 per year in 1990 to 8-10 under 18 year-olds per year today.¹⁰

How to assess if your pupils are using NPS?

Finding out local trends around NPS use may be difficult because:

- The term 'legal highs' or NPS may not hold any significance or recognition for young people (who instead associate specific substances to brand or street names);
- 85% of 'legal high' users don't recognise themselves as drug users (The Legal Highs National Online Survey, 2013);
- Some of these substances (e.g. synthetic cannabinoids) cannot be detected easily as they may not have the same characteristics (e.g. smell) of traditional drugs.

What can schools do?

Trying to understand the particular harms of each individual product, catch up with science and learn 'street names' for each

specific substance (which often vary in relation to geographical location) is almost impossible. However, what schools can do to tackle 'legal highs' use is to deliver preventative education. The use of Novel Psychoactive Substances, volatile substances and related behaviours should be addressed within already existing alcohol and drug education programmes, alongside other substances and in the context of other behaviours that may increase the likelihood of substance use.

In a recent ADEPIS survey delivered to over 280 PSHE teachers across England, respondents shared concerns about their own substance-specific knowledge being out of date and out of line with local trends, pupils' attitudes and knowledge.¹¹

"The main challenge we face is the ever-changing popularity and availability of substances – keeping up to date with current trends. It would be useful to have a more regular way of updating our local data on trends in the area, to make sure our curriculum remains relevant."

However, teachers do not need to be experts to be able to include 'legal highs' in the alcohol and drug education programme, as the approaches needed to tackle novel psychoactive substances are at one with best practice alcohol and drug education.

Although effective alcohol and drug education also includes the provision of relevant, factual and up-to-date information about specific drugs (including their effects, health risks, legal status and street names) it is not confined to this. In fact, research shows that developing pupils' skills, values and positive norms is more valuable and effective than instilling detailed and substance-specific information.

The way forward

Whether the topic is 'legal highs', alcohol or illegal drugs, teachers delivering PSHE should have a clear idea of what makes effective alcohol and drug education. The following features have been suggested to have had an effective preventative impact when part of an alcohol and drug

education programme:

- Delivery of needs-led and age-appropriate sessions;
- Using interactive methods, such as discussions, group or drama based activities;
- Delivery through a series of structured sessions (typically 10-15) once a week, often providing booster sessions over multiple years;
- Delivery of sessions by a trained facilitator (including trained peers);
- Providing opportunities to practice and learn a wide array of personal and social skills, including coping strategies, decision making and resistance skills, particularly in relation to substance abuse;
- Impact perceptions of risks associated with substance abuse and emphasising immediate consequences;
- Dispelling misconceptions regarding the normative nature and expectations linked to substance abuse.

[For more information on what makes effective alcohol and drug education access the ADEPIS [Quality Standards](#)].

Where to start? Needs assessment

The first step for the delivery of effective alcohol and drug education is the assessment of pupils' needs and knowledge. An efficient needs assessment can provide a good picture of students' current knowledge, understanding or values in relation to alcohol and drugs, as well as current trends in alcohol and drug use, risk factors and behaviours. From an efficient assessment teachers or practitioners may be able to determine whether students are aware of new psychoactive substances, the level of their knowledge, as well as related perceptions, opinions and behaviours. [For further information on planning an efficient needs assessments check the related [briefing paper](#)].

Interactive learning

Very often, the knowledge young people have about NPS is gained through peer to peer interactions, or online forums, which

bring along and reinforce a variety of myths and misconceptions. For this reason it is crucial to provide young people with the opportunity to gain relevant information within formal education settings. When delivering alcohol and drug education in the classroom, it is very important to keep in mind that whilst young people are always interested in exploring and learning new subjects, they are not keen on talking about unpleasant risks. It is therefore crucial to avoid scare techniques or echoing messages given by the media (too often related to death or overhyping drug use among young people). This, not only is ineffective in the long-term, but would also compromise teachers' credibility given the legality of some of these substances, and the current lack of a consistent public health message. A well-facilitated and engaging classroom discussion will allow pupils to explore issues of interest or concern, whilst ensuring misconceptions are challenged and corrected (not only in relation to NPS, but also in relation to wider substance abuse and risky behaviours).

Some pupils may feel they are more informed than teachers, in relation to different substances and street names; however teachers should not be discouraged by this as there is no guarantee the information pupils are giving is correct. When confusing or conflicting facts arise, pupils should be encouraged to research the correct information and present it to the classroom through group work or presentations.

Strengthening social skills

A portion of young people using NPS (or other drugs) are making a knowledgeable use of these substances: they know the effects and are happy to try them.

"It's great when I can't cope with my situation. It completely takes me out of my body - 2 or 3 puffs and I'm tripping ...I feel safe when using 'Zebra' - no one can touch me" (Quotations from a KCA service user)

For this reason, focusing on life skills education, rather than substance-specific effects within alcohol and drug education is

paramount to ensure effective preventative outcomes. Teachers should be mindful not to deliver individual sessions on NPS, or specific legal or illegal substances. Instead, the focus should be on the essential developmental skills, proven to be effective in building young people's resilience in relation to risky behaviours and substance misuse.

Learning transferrable social and life skills (e.g. critical thinking, decision-making, creative thinking, effective communication, relationship skills, self-awareness, empathy, and coping with emotions) is essential within alcohol and drug education and PSHE. It improves young people's resilience, strengthens protective factors and teaches how to manage risks that may be shaping pupils' lives. Research suggests that the absence of protective factors in combination with risk factors increase the chances of an individual's involvement in different types of risky behaviours (including the use of substances). Social skills, increasing individual confidence and sense of self-worth, enable young people to identify and avoid situations that put their health or safety at risk, and better manage sensitive or challenging circumstances, as well as social situations involving drugs. [More detail on life skills in alcohol and drug education can be found [here](#)].

Dispelling myths: LEGAL DOES NOT MEAN SAFE

One of the most common perceptions young people have about NPS is in relation to how harmful they can be. The assumption is that the legal status, and the wide availability of substances in head shops or the internet, implies these products are tested, controlled, and hence safe. However the reality is that these compounds have not gone through any test to ensure that they are safe for human consumption.

At present, there is no clear awareness around dosage, related risks and side effects, mainly because these substances are generally marketed as 'plant food', 'bath salts', or 'herbal incense' - not for human consumption. When a new drug comes on the market, no one is sure of

what the health risks are - although they normally tend to be similar to illegal substances, whose effects are mimicked.

Another issue associated with these substances lies in their strength. Some NPS are in fact stronger than the illegal substances they mimic; and therefore require a smaller dosage to obtain similar effects. This can cause major complications to inexperienced and naïve users, who may increase their chances of getting unpleasant side effects, serious health risks, and even overdose.

When talking to children and young people about NPS, it is crucial to bear in mind three common myths that need to be dispelled:

- 'Legal highs' are legal – *They may not be.* Research has shown that products claiming to be legal highs may contain illegal drugs.
- 'Legal highs' are safe – *Legal does not mean safe.* Legal highs may be as dangerous - or in some cases more dangerous - than illegal drugs.
- 'Legal highs' are commonly used among young people – *The use of legal highs is not as common as we may think.* Research shows that young people consistently tend to overestimate both the prevalence and acceptability of drug use among their peers. It is important to correct young people's perceptions of social norms as this can impact on their decisions and behaviours. This can be done through the use of national or local data on alcohol and drug prevalence rates.

Up-to-date national or local data

Crime Survey for England and Wales - <http://tinyurl.com/lzccv82>

Home Office - <http://tinyurl.com/oxugm62>

Office for National Statistics - <http://tinyurl.com/ktc93x9>

Health and Social Care Information Centre - <http://tinyurl.com/n5xkfsn>

Local Alcohol Profiles for England - <http://www.lape.org.uk/>

Public Health England - <http://www.nta.nhs.uk/statistics.aspx>

Child Health and Maternal Health Observatory - <http://www.chimat.org.uk/substanceuse>

School drug policy

A rigorous school policy should set out the school's approach to NPS and volatile substances. Both pupils and staff should be aware of how these products are regarded and treated by the school.

Should schools wish to include NPS in their drug policy, they should bear in mind these rules:

- Be clear – All categories of NPS should be included in the drug policy, regardless of related legal status. These include all substances having psychoactive effects on the brain: depressants, stimulants, cannabinoids, and hallucinogens.
- Do not be too specific – It is not necessary to name different substances or brand names. This would in fact be problematic, as new substances with new names and molecular structure are being introduced to the market every week.

The school drug policy should also outline safeguarding and supporting procedures for pupils using or possessing these substances.

Search and confiscation

Should these substances be prohibited, schools must ensure they follow the guidance produced by the Department for Education when exercising their powers to search and confiscate items from pupils:

Where to get detailed information on NPS?

Relevant and up-to-date information on NPS can be found here:

- FRANK A to Z: <http://www.talktofrank.com/drugs-a-z>
- Crime Reduction Initiatives (CRI): <http://www.cri.org.uk/>
- DrugScope: <http://www.drugscope.org.uk/resources/drugsearch> and DrugWatch
- The Angelus Foundation: <http://www.angelusfoundation.com/>
- Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1971/38/contents>

References:

1. Home Office, Temporary class drugs, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/98006/temporary-class-drug-factsheet.pdf
2. EMCDDA, 2012 annual report on the state of the drugs problem in Europe, <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/annual-report/2012>
3. Intoxicating Substances (Supply) Act 1985 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1985/26>
4. Drug Strategy 2010: Annual Review May 2012 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/drug-strategy-2010-annual-review-may-2012>
5. Angelus Foundation, Adfam, Central and North West London NHS, Talking to your children about legal highs and club drugs, a parent's handbook
6. For further information on different terms and/or substances, please visit FRANK <http://www.talktofrank.com/drugs-a-z>
7. UNODC, World Drug report 2012, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR2012/WDR_2012_web_small.pdf
8. Sumnall, H, (2014), Some thoughts on the tricky problem of 'legal high' drugs education <http://www.cph.org.uk/blog/some-thoughts-on-the-tricky-problem-of-legal-high-drugs-education/>
9. Home Office, Drug Misuse: Findings from the 2012/13 Crime Survey for England and Wales, July 2013
10. Ghodse, H., Ahmed, K., Corkery, J., Naidoo, V., Schifano, F., 2010, Trends in UK deaths associated with abuse of volatile substances, 1971-2008, International Centre for Drug Policy (ICDP), St George's, University of London (www.sgul.ac.uk/research/projects/icdp/our-work-programmes/substance-abuse-deaths).
11. ADEPIS, (2013), Drug and Alcohol Education in Schools <http://mentor-adepis.org/get-the-facts/drug-alcohol-education-schools/>

About ADEPIS

The Alcohol and Drug Education and Prevention Information Service is run by Mentor, the drug and alcohol protection charity, in conjunction with DrugScope and Adfam, and is funded by the Department for Education.



More resources and advice are available from mentor-adepis.org. For further information, contact:

ADEPIS c/o Mentor
1st Floor, 67-69 Cowcross Street
London EC1M 6PU
adepis@mentoruk.org
020 7553 9920