National Alcohol and Drugs Conference 2018

Evidence-based best practice in alcohol and drugs education
Empowering young people to make healthy choices in the classroom and beyond

On the 20th June, The AET and Mentor hosted a conference for all those working with young people at Liverpool John Moores University, showcasing teaching methods, psychologies and evidence-based approaches that reduce children's negative risk taking. Attendees travelled from as far as Gibraltar, Ireland, The Isle of Man and Wales to enjoy a day of thought-provoking presentations and practical workshops.

David Regis of The School Health and Education Unit (SHEU) set the scene, highlighting trends in children's harmful behaviours since the 1980s. Of particular interest was how high self-esteem used to be associated with higher levels and earlier age of drinking, whereas now it is the reverse. Those with low self-esteem are more likely to drink and binge drink. This suggests the success of approaches that build children's life skills such as understanding personal responsibility and resilience to peer pressure. Trends, not only in the UK, but in the US, and much of Europe see a continued reduction in harmful behaviours among under 18s, with some notable exceptions, such as those who identify as LGBT.

Victoria Atkins, Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, highlighted the Home Office priorities for young people and especially more vulnerable children.

Nick Gibb, Schools Standards Minister, highlighted the framework in which drug and alcohol education should be delivered in schools and the timetable for RSE and the statutory status of PSHE.

Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester and Police and Crime Commissioner, gave an impassioned address from on how the most important element that will improve children's outcomes is hope. The Greater Manchester Authorities' survey of young people found that 40% did not see hope for a positive future and unless the root causes of this were addressed, then drugs and alcohol education were secondary. He is working to build aspiration through better careers advice and apprenticeship opportunities.

Dr John McAlaney, Senior Academic of Psychology at Bournemouth University, explained in his talk ‘Are you normal? (Mis)perceptions of alcohol and drug use in adolescents’ how social norms campaigns can change behaviour – or do the reverse, and showed how we can use techniques at a local and individual school level, harness social media and create a very affordable campaign.
PC Amy Fletcher, Cheshire Constabulary, explained the hands on role of the safer communities team of Cheshire Police and the extensive work they do in schools and in the community across Cheshire. The team have received training in Talk About Alcohol and each officer has a resource pack which they use in a range of settings and ways across the County.

Helena Conibear, CEO of The Alcohol Education Trust, showcased the 11 evidenced principles of effective PSHE that make alcohol education both enjoyable, interactive and engaging.

Lauren Bond, health coach, author and journalist, provided an insight into why children who face adverse childhood experiences are at higher risk of substance misuse, lack concentration, trust and the ability to form bonds of friendship. Her presentation showed how the school environment can offer a haven of routine, safety and trust if children are identified and the right structures put in place to support vulnerable children from an early age.

The afternoon offered delegates the opportunity to attend workshops on implementing the Talk About Alcohol programme, using the Mentor Quality Mark to assess the effectiveness of school programmes and ensure evidence-based programmes are used, approaches for vulnerable children and classroom-based activities to make PSHE effective and fun.

To learn more please email kate@alcoholeducationtrust.org and you can view the presentations here.

Comments from one delegate:

‘I am massively grateful to have had the opportunity to attend the conference and workshop. It has given me inspiration and renewed energy to shake up ‘the dreaded’ PSHE/Life Skills lessons.’