

A visit to The Loop at Bestival summer 2018

In January 2014 my funny, kind, clever, chatty, popular 16-year old son Dan went out with some friends, but never came home. He'd taken MDMA along with some of the others he was with, not knowing his little bag was fatally strong, and died from multiple organ failure after three days on life support. He was the very last person anyone would have expected to come to harm from drugs, but he did. As a mother I wanted to do all I could to prevent any harm happening to anyone else's child. As a teacher my response to this was to set up a drug education charity, the Daniel Spargo-Mabbs Foundation, to make sure all young people have the information, understanding and life skills they need to enable them to make safe choices about drugs. We've been working with students, parents and carers, teachers and professionals in a rapidly growing number of schools, colleges and community organisations ever since, across London and further afield.

I became aware of non-profit organisation The Loop in summer 2016, when they offered their drug testing and counselling service at two music festivals, and I've been talking to young people, parents and teachers about their work ever since, because it's such a clear demonstration of the unknown nature of illegally supplied drugs. At the end of the very careless, messy process of drug manufacture and supply, without having pills or powders professionally tested by specialists with specialist equipment there is no way the user can know either how strong or how pure the substance is that they plan to take, or if it also contains other risky substances. At music festivals the levels of drug use are significantly higher than in most other places on earth, however hard the festival organisers try to keep them out, and every year young people come to varying degrees of harm. This summer the festival season began with two young lives being lost to drugs at Mutiny Festival in May.

The Loop offers a confidential drug testing service, working under a promise of amnesty from the police, meaning people cannot be arrested if they drop off samples. Importantly though they don't stop there, and also provide a counselling and harm reduction session to festival goers. Users need to know what their results actually mean, and to understand the complex range of factors that affect the risks to them if they choose to go ahead and take it, and how those risks can be reduced. The first and last message is always that the only way to reduce drug-related risk to zero however is not to take drugs at all.

On a sunny Saturday in August I was able to see this first hand, as a guest of The Loop at Bestival in Dorset. In a hot portacabin volunteers, mostly chemists and pharmacists, were working on drug samples, using an intriguing array of equipment to find out exactly what was in what had been handed in, and how much. They told me they were mostly testing MDMA, ketamine and cocaine. A significant issue was the wide range in strength of drugs, with some incredibly strong and pure MDMA in particular being sold, as well as cocaine. Adulterants are still a big issue too though, and I arrived just as a warning was going out about pentylone, which had been found in what had been sold as MDMA. Two young festival goers had been wide awake, agitated and paranoid since two days earlier, having been found having a serious psychotic episode outside The Loop's tent after unknowingly taken this.

Alongside them, in the main tent, festival goers were arriving to collect their results and have a chat with counsellors. I was able to speak to a couple of them on their break, and they told me the conversations they have are often the first honest ones that people have had with anyone about their drug use, and they guessed that most had not had any drug education at school, or not anything that helped them understand the risks they were taking or to know how to reduce or manage these. They said they did a lot of informal chatting hanging around outside the tent, as well

as inside, sometimes with people who were thinking about taking something for the first time who wanted to find out more about it.

Always controversial because of concerns it condones drug use, or sends the message this makes drug taking safe, this is nevertheless the last line of defence for anyone with drugs and an intention to take them, for whatever reason. If Dan could have had his bag of MDMA tested and found it was twelve times stronger than had caused fatality in the past, perhaps he'd still be here. The counsellors I spoke to reinforced what all the reports of The Loops' work had said, that around one in five people decide not to take their drugs at all when they know what's in them and have spoken to their team, and about half decide to take less, or take their drugs more slowly. Drug-related harms are significantly lower at the festivals they've been at, and that has to be a good thing. The first line of defence, however – good, comprehensive, age-appropriate, evidence-based drug education - remains absolutely essential. With this behind them before they even set off, festival goers arrive better armed to make choices that keep them safe from harm.

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The Daniel Spargo-Mabbs Foundation

For more information please see www.dsmfoundation.org.uk or email admin@dsmfoundation.org.uk