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# Addressing young people's sex and alcohol use: It's about aspiration not information.

The links between alcohol and sexual risk taking have long been acknowledged both in the research literature and observed in the day to day activities of adults and young people. As part of a strategy to reduce teenage conceptions and to improve young people's sexual health, Rochdale Teenage Pregnancy Strategy undertook research with 14 - 15 year olds in all 14 of the borough's secondary schools to gain a more systematic understanding of their knowledge, values and experience in relation to sex and alcohol use. Space does not allow for a detailed report of the research; instead this article will identify the key conclusions from the research and reflect briefly on potential ways of moving the work forward.

### Methodology and sample

In 2004 over 2,000 questionnaires were completed by year 10 pupils in all the schools in Rochdale and the data was supplemented by focus group involving nearly 70 pupils. No data were collected from young people not in school. Following a number of interventions the questionnaire was re-administered to a slightly larger cohort in 2007 as a way of evaluating progress. The average age of participants was 15 years and 3 months and 17% were from ethnic minorities mainly Pakistani and Bangladeshi muslims (an appropriate reflection of Rochdale's demography).

### Selected Results

Sometime use of alcohol was almost

universal in the cohort, particularly among the white young people but there was a smaller cohort identified (12-15%) who were drinking at a level that was problematic in that it was leading them to do things that they regretted and such that they felt out of control. Girls were significantly more likely to report these behaviours than boys. Knowledge level relating to alcohol was relatively poor especially among Asian young people. The source of young people's alcohol tended not to be through direct purchase suggesting that attempts to control alcohol access in this way will not be effective in relation to this group. Attitudes to alcohol were very positive in that it was seen to improve confidence, improve social situations and contribute to having a good time.

32% of the respondents reported having had sexual intercourse with this figure being slightly higher among young women. Sexual health knowledge varied considerably with white young women's knowledge levels exceeding those of white young men, with Asian young people of both sexes having significantly less knowledge.

Whilst this headline information is interesting, it will not come as a surprise to most of those working in the field. More interesting and useful was the analysis carried out on the data that sought to understand some of the underlying mechanisms that correlated with more or less risk taking.

There was a very clear correlation

between having ever been drunk and sexual intercourse; among women those that had ever been drunk were ten times more likely to report having had sex.

In relation to sex, knowledge was not, of itself, a protective factor - those that were sexually active were those whose knowledge was highest. This probably reflects a "need to know" effect but it does highlight the need to ensure that young people are not just equipped with knowledge, but also with the skills and personal values to keep themselves safe.

Participants were asked about their future education plans as a way of assessing aspiration and this provided the clearest correlation with sex and drug use. Those with higher aspirations (regardless of gender or ethnicity) were more likely to have high knowledge levels, were less likely to have ever been drunk and less likely to report having had sexual intercourse. In relation to the latter, those young people planning to leave school at 16 were nearly twice as likely to report having intercourse than their peers who plan to go to university.

## Discussion

The research quite clearly demonstrates the links between alcohol and sexual health, but more importantly it suggests that problematic behaviour in relation to both is underpinned by young people's aspirations for themselves rather than being a matter of information levels. This means that those of us who wish to enable young people not to drink problematically and to delay their sexual activity, at least to a point where they are in control and they are less likely to experience regret, need to focus our efforts on building aspirations, skills and self confidence rather than imparting information. This is not to say that there is no place for information but rather that it cannot of itself equip young people to make safer decisions in relation to alcohol and sex.

Throughout the research process young people's discourses in relation to alcohol were as an enabler, a source of confidence and as a source of fun - not radically different from how many adults view it! Most young people, even at aged 15, had tried drinking, but only a minority are experiencing problems and there is a need to target alcohol education better so that alcohol use is not problematised indiscriminately but is recognised as a cultural norm for most young people, and a source of problems for a few.

There is the need for a similar perspective on sexual behaviour. Most young people are not having sex and those that are do not do so out of a lack of knowledge. Sex has a meaning for them that is tied up with aspiration and self image, but also, overwhelmingly, with pleasure, excitement and experimentation.

## Conclusion

This research provides a vivid picture of the relationships between sex and alcohol use for a large cohort of 14 -15 year olds and suggests strongly that if the risks and negative outcomes relating to both are to be addressed then it is by recognising the perspectives of young people and shifting the focus away from information giving and towards improving aspirations and self confidence.

## Acknowledgements

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