

The ASSIST programme

The ASSIST programme began with the administration of a peer questionnaire in which Year 8 students were asked to identify other students in their year whom they 'respected', 'looked up to' and regarded as 'good leaders in sports and other group activities'. The 18 per cent most nominated students, reflecting the gender balance within the year group, were asked to attend a recruitment meeting at which they were invited to train as peer supporters. Allowing for refusal and attrition, the target was to recruit and train 15 per cent of the year group to diffuse the health promotion message (Kelly & Stevenson, 1992).

Those students who agreed to train as peer supporters were taken out of school for a two-day training event, run by a team of trainers. The aim of the training was to give peer supporters the information, skills and confidence to discourage smoking amongst their year group through informal conversations about the risks of smoking and the benefits of being smoke-free.

For the following ten weeks of school time, the peer supporters undertook their role and kept a record of their conversations in a simple diary. During this period, the health promotion trainers offered support at four school-based follow-up sessions. After ten weeks the intervention ended, the diaries were collected, and the peer supporters were presented with certificates and gift vouchers to acknowledge their efforts.

Results of the ASSIST evaluation

The ASSIST programme was evaluated using a randomised controlled trial. Schools where, in addition to their usual smoking education, young people were trained as peer supporters (the 'intervention' schools) were compared with schools that just continued with their usual smoking education (the 'control' schools).

Reduction in smoking levels

Data collected one year after the ASSIST programme took place in schools suggest the relative risk of students reporting weekly smoking was 18.3 per cent lower amongst the project's target group of ex-smokers, occasional or experimental smokers in the intervention schools compared with control schools. This promising reduction in self-reported smoking was supported by analysis of salivary cotinine levels. These results support earlier findings of the feasibility study and confirm that the intervention is particularly effective amongst the trial's primary target group of young people who are at risk of becoming regular smokers.